

# Othello

by William Shakespeare



## Copyright Notice

©1998–2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

All or part of the content in these eNotes comes from MAXnotes® for Othello, and is copyrighted by Research and Education Association (REA). No part of this content may be reproduced in any form without the permission of REA.

©2006 eNotes.com LLC

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information on these eNotes please visit:

<http://www.enotes.com/othello/copyright>

## Table of Contents

1. [Othello: Introduction](#)
2. [William Shakespeare Biography](#)
3. [Reading Shakespeare](#)
4. [List of Characters](#)
5. [Historical Background](#)
6. [One-Page Summary](#)
7. [Summary and Analysis](#)
8. [Critical Commentary](#)
9. [Quizzes](#)
10. [Themes](#)
11. [Character Analysis](#)
12. [Principal Topics](#)
13. [Essays](#)
14. [Criticism](#)
15. [Selected Quotes](#)
16. [Suggested Essay Topics](#)
17. [Sample Essay Outlines](#)
18. [Modern Connections](#)
19. [FAQs](#)
20. [Bibliography and Further Reading](#)
21. [Copyright](#)

## Introduction

Along with *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies and thus a pillar of what most critics take to be the apex of Shakespeare's dramatic art. More than anything else, what distinguishes *Othello* from its great tragedies peers is the role of its villain, Iago. While the usurper King Claudius of *Hamlet*, the faithless daughters of *Lear*, and the unnatural villains of *Macbeth* (Macbeth, his Lady and the Weird Sister witches) are all impressively evil in their own way, none of them enjoys the same diabolical role as Iago.

Iago is a character who essentially writes the play's main plot, takes a key part in it, and gives first-hand direction to the others, most notably to the noble Moor, Othello. The play presents us with two remarkable characters, Iago and his victim, with Iago as the dominant force which causes Othello to see the infidelity of his young and beautiful wife, Desdemona, with his favorite lieutenant, Michael Cassio. Indeed, not only is "seeing" and the gap between appearance and reality a central theme of the play, it overlaps with other major thematic strands (trust, honor, and reputation) and sheds light on still others, including the theme of patriarchy and the political state.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Author Biography

### The Life and Work of William Shakespeare

The details of William Shakespeare's life are sketchy, mostly mere surmise based upon court or other clerical records. His parents, John and Mary (Arden), were married about 1557; she was of the landed gentry, and he was a yeoman—a glover and commodities merchant. By 1568, John had risen through the ranks of town government and held the position of high bailiff, which was a position similar to mayor. William, the eldest son and the third of eight children, was born in 1564, probably on April 23, several days before his baptism on April 26 in Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare is also believed to have died on the same date—April 23—in 1616.

It is believed that William attended the local grammar school in Stratford where his parents lived, and that he studied primarily Latin, rhetoric, logic, and literature. Shakespeare probably left school at age 15, which was the norm, to take a job, especially since this was the period of his father's financial difficulty. At age 18 (1582), William married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter who was eight years his senior. Their first daughter (Susanna) was born six months later (1583), and twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585.

Shakespeare's life can be divided into three periods: the first 20 years in Stratford, which include his schooling, early marriage, and fatherhood; the next 25 years as an actor and playwright in London; and the last five in retirement in Stratford where he enjoyed moderate wealth gained from his theatrical successes. The years linking the first two periods are marked by a lack of information about Shakespeare, and are often referred to as the "dark years."

At some point during the "dark years," Shakespeare began his career with a London theatrical company, perhaps in 1589, for he was already an actor and playwright of some note by 1592. Shakespeare apparently wrote and acted for numerous theatrical companies, including Pembroke's Men, and Strange's Men, which later became the Chamberlain's Men, with whom he remained for the rest of his career.

In 1592, the Plague closed the theaters for about two years, and Shakespeare turned to writing book-length narrative poetry. Most notable were *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both of which were

dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, whom scholars accept as Shakespeare's friend and benefactor despite a lack of documentation. During this same period, Shakespeare was writing his sonnets, which are more likely signs of the time's fashion rather than actual love poems detailing any particular relationship. He returned to playwriting when theaters reopened in 1594, and did not continue to write poetry. His sonnets were published without his consent in 1609, shortly before his retirement.

Amid all of his success, Shakespeare suffered the loss of his only son, Hamnet, who died in 1596 at the age of 11. But Shakespeare's career continued unabated, and in London in 1599, he became one of the partners in the new Globe Theater, which was built by the Chamberlain's Men.

Shakespeare wrote very little after 1612, which was the year he completed *Henry VIII*. It was during a performance of this play in 1613 that the Globe caught fire and burned to the ground. Sometime between 1610 and 1613, Shakespeare returned to Stratford, where he owned a large house and property, to spend his remaining years with his family.

William Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried two days later in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, where he had been baptized exactly 52 years earlier. His literary legacy included 37 plays, 154 sonnets, and five major poems.

Incredibly, most of Shakespeare's plays had never been published in anything except pamphlet form, and were simply extant as acting scripts stored at the Globe. Theater scripts were not regarded as literary works of art, but only the basis for the performance. Plays were simply a popular form of entertainment for all layers of society in Shakespeare's time. Only the efforts of two of Shakespeare's company, John Heminges and Henry Condell, preserved his 36 plays (minus *Pericles*, the thirty-seventh).

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Reading Shakespeare

In this section:

- [Shakespeare's Language](#)
- [Shakespeare's Sentences](#)
- [Shakespeare's Words](#)
- [Shakespeare's Wordplay](#)
- [Shakespeare's Dramatic Verse](#)
- [Implied Stage Action](#)

### Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare's language can create a strong pang of intimidation, even fear, in a large number of modern-day readers. Fortunately, however, this need not be the case. All that is needed to master the art of reading Shakespeare is to practice the techniques of unraveling uncommonly-structured sentences and to become familiar with the poetic use of uncommon words. We must realize that during the 400-year span between Shakespeare's time and our own, both the way we live and speak has changed. Although most of his vocabulary is in use today, some of it is obsolete, and what may be most confusing is that some of his words are used today, but with slightly different or totally different meanings. On the stage, actors readily dissolve these language stumbling blocks. They study Shakespeare's dialogue and express it dramatically in word and in action so that its meaning is graphically enacted. If the reader studies Shakespeare's lines as an actor does, looking up and reflecting upon the meaning of unfamiliar words until real voice is discovered, he or she will

suddenly experience the excitement, the depth and the sheer poetry of what these characters say.

### Shakespeare's Sentences

In English, or any other language, the meaning of a sentence greatly depends upon where each word is placed in that sentence. "The child hurt the mother" and "The mother hurt the child" have opposite meanings, even though the words are the same, simply because the words are arranged differently. Because word position is so integral to English, the reader will find unfamiliar word arrangements confusing, even difficult to understand. Since Shakespeare's plays are poetic dramas, he often shifts from average word arrangements to the strikingly unusual so that the line will conform to the desired poetic rhythm. Often, too, Shakespeare employs unusual word order to afford a character his own specific style of speaking.

Today, English sentence structure follows a sequence of subject first, verb second, and an optional object third. Shakespeare, however, often places the verb before the subject, which reads, "Speaks he" rather than "He speaks." Solanio speaks with this inverted structure in *The Merchant of Venice* stating, "I should be still/Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind" (Bevington edition, I, i, ll.17–19), while today's standard English word order would have the clause at the end of this line read, "where the wind sits." "Wind" is the subject of this clause, and "sits" is the verb. Bassanio's words in Act Two also exemplify this inversion: "And in such eyes as ours appear not faults" (II, ii, l. 184). In our normal word order, we would say, "Faults do not appear in eyes such as ours," with "faults" as the subject in both Shakespeare's word order and ours.

Inversions like these are not troublesome, but when Shakespeare positions the predicate adjective or the object before the subject and verb, we are sometimes surprised. For example, rather than "I saw him," Shakespeare may use a structure such as "Him I saw." Similarly, "Cold the morning is" would be used for our "The morning is cold." Lady Macbeth demonstrates this inversion as she speaks of her husband: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be/What thou art promised" (Macbeth, I, v, ll. 14–15). In current English word order, this quote would begin, "Thou art Glamis, and Cawdor."

In addition to inversions, Shakespeare purposefully keeps words apart that we generally keep together. To illustrate, consider Bassanio's humble admission in *The Merchant of Venice*: "I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,/That which I owe is lost" (I, i, ll. 146–147). The phrase, "like a wilful youth," separates the regular sequence of "I owe you much" and "That which I owe is lost." To understand more clearly this type of passage, the reader could rearrange these word groups into our conventional order: I owe you much and I wasted what you gave me because I was young and impulsive. While these rearranged clauses will sound like normal English, and will be simpler to understand, they will no longer have the desired poetic rhythm, and the emphasis will now be on the wrong words.

As we read Shakespeare, we will find words that are separated by long, interruptive statements. Often subjects are separated from verbs, and verbs are separated from objects. These long interruptions can be used to give a character dimension or to add an element of suspense. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* Benvolio describes both Romeo's moodiness and his own sensitive and thoughtful nature:

I, measuring his affections by my own,  
Which then most sought, where most might not be found,  
Being one too many by my weary self,  
Pursu'd my humour, not pursuing his,  
And gladly shunn'd who gladly fled from me. (I, i, ll. 126–130)

In this passage, the subject "I" is distanced from its verb "Pursu'd." The long interruption serves to provide information which is integral to the plot. Another example, taken from *Hamlet*, is the ghost, Hamlet's father, who describes Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, as

...that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—  
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power  
So to seduce—won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen. (I, v, ll. 43–47)

From this we learn that Prince Hamlet's mother is the victim of an evil seduction and deception. The delay between the subject, "beast," and the verb, "won," creates a moment of tension filled with the image of a cunning predator waiting for the right moment to spring into attack. This interruptive passage allows the play to unfold crucial information and thus to build the tension necessary to produce a riveting drama.

While at times these long delays are merely for decorative purposes, they are often used to narrate a particular situation or to enhance character development. As *Antony and Cleopatra* opens, an interruptive passage occurs in the first few lines. Although the delay is not lengthy, Philo's words vividly portray Antony's military prowess while they also reveal the immediate concern of the drama. Antony is distracted from his career, and is now focused on Cleopatra:

...those goodly eyes,  
That o'er the files and musters of the war  
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
The office and devotion of their view  
Upon a tawny front.... (I, i, ll. 2–6)

Whereas Shakespeare sometimes heaps detail upon detail, his sentences are often elliptical, that is, they omit words we expect in written English sentences. In fact, we often do this in our spoken conversations. For instance, we say, "You see that?" when we really mean, "Did you see that?" Reading poetry or listening to lyrics in music conditions us to supply the omitted words and it makes us more comfortable reading this type of dialogue. Consider one passage in *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio's friends ask him why he seems so sad and Solanio tells Antonio, "Why, then you are in love" (I, i, l. 46). When Antonio denies this, Solanio responds, "Not in love neither?" (I, i, l. 47). The word "you" is omitted but understood despite the confusing double negative.

In addition to leaving out words, Shakespeare often uses intentionally vague language, a strategy which taxes the reader's attentiveness. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra, upset that Antony is leaving for Rome after learning that his wife died in battle, convinces him to stay in Egypt:

Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it:  
Sir you and I have lov'd, but there's not it;  
That you know well, something it is I would—  
O, my oblivion is a very Antony,  
And I am all forgotten. (I, iii, ll. 87–91)

In line 89, "...something it is I would" suggests that there is something that she would want to say, do, or have done. The intentional vagueness leaves us, and certainly Antony, to wonder. Though this sort of writing may appear lackadaisical for all that it leaves out, here the vagueness functions to portray Cleopatra as rhetorically sophisticated. Similarly, when asked what thing a crocodile is (meaning Antony himself who is being compared to a crocodile), Antony slyly evades the question by giving a vague reply:

It is shap'd, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth.  
It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs.  
It lives by that which nourisheth it, and, the elements once out of it, it transmigrates. (II, vii,

This kind of evasiveness, or doubletalk, occurs often in Shakespeare's writing and requires extra patience on the part of the reader.

### Shakespeare's Words

As we read Shakespeare's plays, we will encounter uncommon words. Many of these words are not in use today. As *Romeo and Juliet* opens, we notice words like "shrift" (confession) and "holidame" (a holy relic). Words like these should be explained in notes to the text. Shakespeare also employs words which we still use, though with different meaning. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice* "caskets" refer to small, decorative chests for holding jewels. However, modern readers may think of a large cask instead of the smaller, diminutive casket.

Another trouble modern readers will have with Shakespeare's English is with words that are still in use today, but which mean something different in Elizabethan use. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare uses the word "straight" (as in "straight away") where we would say "immediately." Here, the modern reader is unlikely to carry away the wrong message, however, since the modern meaning will simply make no sense. In this case, textual notes will clarify a phrase's meaning. To cite another example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, after Mercutio dies, Romeo states that the "black fate on moe days doth depend" (emphasis added). In this case, "depend" really means "impend."

### Shakespeare's Wordplay

All of Shakespeare's works exhibit his mastery of playing with language and with such variety that many people have authored entire books on this subject alone. Shakespeare's most frequently used types of wordplay are common: metaphors, similes, synecdoche and metonymy, personification, allusion, and puns. It is when Shakespeare violates the normal use of these devices, or rhetorical figures, that the language becomes confusing.

A metaphor is a comparison in which an object or idea is replaced by another object or idea with common attributes. For example, in *Macbeth* a murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo has been murdered, as directed, but that his son, Fleance, escaped, having witnessed his father's murder. Fleance, now a threat to *Macbeth*, is described as a serpent:

There the grown serpent lies, the worm that's fled  
Hath nature that in time will venom breed,  
No teeth for the present. (III, iv, ll. 29–31)

Similes, on the other hand, compare objects or ideas while using the words "like" or "as." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo tells Juliet that "Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books" (II, ii, l. 156). Such similes often give way to more involved comparisons, "extended similes." For example, Juliet tells Romeo:

'Tis almost morning,  
I would have thee gone,  
And yet no farther than a wonton's bird,  
That lets it hop a little from his hand  
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,  
And with silken thread plucks it back again,  
So loving-jealous of his liberty. (II, ii, ll. 176–181)

An epic simile, a device borrowed from heroic poetry, is an extended simile that builds into an even more elaborate comparison. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth describes King Duncan's virtues with an angelic, celestial simile

and then drives immediately into another simile that redirects us into a vision of warfare and destruction:

...Besides this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind.... (I, vii, ll. 16–25)

Shakespeare employs other devices, like synecdoche and metonymy, to achieve “verbal economy,” or using one or two words to express more than one thought. Synecdoche is a figure of speech using a part for the whole. An example of synecdoche is using the word boards to imply a stage. Boards are only a small part of the materials that make up a stage, however, the term boards has become a colloquial synonym for stage. Metonymy is a figure of speech using the name of one thing for that of another which it is associated. An example of metonymy is using crown to mean the king (as used in the sentence “These lands belong to the crown”). Since a crown is associated with or an attribute of the king, the word crown has become a metonymy for the king. It is important to understand that every metonymy is a synecdoche, but not every synecdoche is a metonymy. This rule is true because a metonymy must not only be a part of the root word, making a synecdoche, but also be a unique attribute of or associated with the root word.

Synecdoche and metonymy in Shakespeare's works is often very confusing to a new student because he creates uses for words that they usually do not perform. This technique is often complicated and yet very subtle, which makes it difficult of a new student to dissect and understand. An example of these devices in one of Shakespeare's plays can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*. In warning his daughter, Jessica, to ignore the Christian revelries in the streets below, Shylock says:

Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,  
Clamber not you up to the casements then... (I, v, ll. 30–32)

The phrase of importance in this quote is “the wry-necked fife.” When a reader examines this phrase it does not seem to make sense; a fife is a cylinder-shaped instrument, there is no part of it that can be called a neck. The phrase then must be taken to refer to the fife-player, who has to twist his or her neck to play the fife. Fife, therefore, is a synecdoche for fife-player, much as boards is for stage. The trouble with understanding this phrase is that “vile squealing” logically refers to the sound of the fife, not the fife-player, and the reader might be led to take fife as the instrument because of the parallel reference to “drum” in the previous line. The best solution to this quandary is that Shakespeare uses the word fife to refer to both the instrument and the player. Both the player and the instrument are needed to complete the wordplay in this phrase, which, though difficult to understand to new readers, cannot be seen as a flaw since Shakespeare manages to convey two meanings with one word. This remarkable example of synecdoche illuminates Shakespeare's mastery of “verbal economy.”

Shakespeare also uses vivid and imagistic wordplay through personification, in which human capacities and behaviors are attributed to inanimate objects. Bassanio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, almost speechless when Portia promises to marry him and share all her worldly wealth, states “my blood speaks to you in my veins...” (III, ii, l. 176). How deeply he must feel since even his blood can speak. Similarly, Portia, learning of the penalty that Antonio must pay for defaulting on his debt, tells Salerio, “There are some shrewd contents in

yond same paper/That steals the color from Bassanio's cheek" (III, ii, ll. 243–244).

Another important facet of Shakespeare's rhetorical repertoire is his use of allusion. An allusion is a reference to another author or to an historical figure or event. Very often Shakespeare alludes to the heroes and heroines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For example, in *Cymbeline* an entire room is decorated with images illustrating the stories from this classical work, and the heroine, Imogen, has been reading from this text. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus* characters not only read directly from the *Metamorphoses*, but a subplot re-enacts one of the *Metamorphoses*'s most famous stories, the rape and mutilation of Philomel. Another way Shakespeare uses allusion is to drop names of mythological, historical and literary figures. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, Petruchio compares Katharina, the woman whom he is courting, to Diana (II, i, l. 55), the virgin goddess, in order to suggest that Katharina is a man-hater. At times, Shakespeare will allude to well-known figures without so much as mentioning their names. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, though the Duke and Valentine are ostensibly interested in Olivia, a rich countess, Shakespeare asks his audience to compare the Duke's emotional turmoil to the plight of Acteon, whom the goddess Diana transforms into a deer to be hunted and killed by Acteon's own dogs:

Duke:

That instant was I turn'd into a hart,  
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,  
E'er since pursue me. [...]

Valentine:

But like a cloistress she will veiled walk,  
And water once a day her chamber round.... (I, i, l. 20 ff.)

Shakespeare's use of puns spotlights his exceptional wit. His comedies in particular are loaded with puns, usually of a sexual nature. Puns work through the ambiguity that results when multiple senses of a word are evoked; homophones often cause this sort of ambiguity. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus believes "there is mettle in death" (I, ii, l. 146), meaning that there is "courage" in death; at the same time, mettle suggests the homophone metal, referring to swords made of metal causing death. In early editions of Shakespeare's work there was no distinction made between the two words. Antony puns on the word "earring," (I, ii, ll. 112–114) meaning both plowing (as in rooting out weeds) and hearing: he angrily sends away a messenger, not wishing to hear the message from his wife, Fulvia: "...O then we bring forth weeds,/when our quick minds lie still, and our ills told us/Is as our earing." If ill-natured news is planted in one's "hearing," it will render an "earring" (harvest) of ill-natured thoughts. A particularly clever pun, also in *Antony and Cleopatra*, stands out after Antony's troops have fought Octavius's men in Egypt: "We have beat him to his camp. Run one before,/And let the queen know of our gests" (IV, viii, ll. 1–2). Here "gests" means deeds (in this case, deeds of battle); it is also a pun on "guests," as though Octavius' slain soldiers were to be guests when buried in Egypt.

One should note that Elizabethan pronunciation was in several cases different from our own. Thus, modern readers, especially Americans, will miss out on the many puns based on homophones. The textual notes will point up many of these "lost" puns, however.

Shakespeare's sexual innuendoes can be either clever or tedious depending upon the speaker and situation. The modern reader should recall that sexuality in Shakespeare's time was far more complex than in ours and that characters may refer to such things as masturbation and homosexual activity. Textual notes in some editions will point out these puns but rarely explain them. An example of a sexual pun or innuendo can be found in *The Merchant of Venice* when Portia and Nerissa are discussing Portia's past suitors using innuendo to tell of their sexual prowess:



Portia:

I pray thee, overname them, and as thou namest them, I will describe them, and according to my description level at my affection.

Nerrisa:

First, there is the Neapolitan prince.

Portia:

Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse, and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts that he can shoe him himself. I am much afeard my lady his mother played false with the smith. (I, ii, ll. 35–45)

The “Neapolitan prince” is given a grade of an inexperienced youth when Portia describes him as a “colt.” The prince is thought to be inexperienced because he did nothing but “talk of his horse” (a pun for his penis) and his other great attributes. Portia goes on to say that the prince boasted that he could “shoe him [his horse] himself,” a possible pun meaning that the prince was very proud that he could masturbate. Finally, Portia makes an attack upon the prince's mother, saying that “my lady his mother played false with the smith,” a pun to say his mother must have committed adultery with a blacksmith to give birth to such a vulgar man having an obsession with “shoeing his horse.”

It is worth mentioning that Shakespeare gives the reader hints when his characters might be using puns and innuendoes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's lines are given in prose when she is joking, or engaged in bawdy conversations. Later on the reader will notice that Portia's lines are rhymed in poetry, such as when she is talking in court or to Bassanio. This is Shakespeare's way of letting the reader know when Portia is jesting and when she is serious.

### Shakespeare's Dramatic Verse

Finally, the reader will notice that some lines are actually rhymed verse while others are in verse without rhyme; and much of Shakespeare's drama is in prose. Shakespeare usually has his lovers speak in the language of love poetry which uses rhymed couplets. The archetypal example of this comes, of course, from *Romeo and Juliet*:

The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night,  
Check'ring the eastern clouds with streaks of light,  
And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels  
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.  
(II, iii, ll. 1–4)

Here it is ironic that Friar Lawrence should speak these lines since he is not the one in love. He, therefore, appears buffoonish and out of touch with reality. Shakespeare often has his characters speak in rhymed verse to let the reader know that the character is acting in jest, and vice-versa.

Perhaps the majority of Shakespeare's lines are in blank verse, a form of poetry which does not use rhyme (hence the name blank) but still employs a rhythm native to the English language, iambic pentameter, where every second syllable in a line of ten syllables receives stress. Consider the following verses from *Hamlet*, and note the accents and the lack of end-rhyme:

The síngle ánd pecúliar lífe is bóund  
With áll the stréngth and ármor óf the mínd (III, iii, ll. 12–13)

The final syllable of these verses receives stress and is said to have a hard, or “strong,” ending. A soft ending, also said to be “weak,” receives no stress. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses a soft ending to shape a verse that demonstrates through both sound (meter) and sense the capacity of the feminine to propagate:

and thén I lóv’d thee  
And shów’d thee áll the quálitíes o’ th’ ísle,  
The frésh spríngs, bríne–pits, bárren pláce and fértile. (I, ii, ll. 338–40)

The first and third of these lines here have soft endings.

In general, Shakespeare saves blank verse for his characters of noble birth. Therefore, it is significant when his lofty characters speak in prose. Prose holds a special place in Shakespeare’s dialogues; he uses it to represent the speech habits of the common people. Not only do lowly servants and common citizens speak in prose, but important, lower class figures also use this form, at times ribald variety of speech. Though Shakespeare crafts some very ornate lines in verse, his prose can be equally daunting, for some of his characters may speechify and break into doubletalk in their attempts to show sophistication. A clever instance of this comes when the Third Citizen in *Coriolanus* refers to the people’s paradoxical lack of power when they must elect Coriolanus as their new leader once Coriolanus has orated how he has courageously fought for them in battle:

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do; for if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude, of the which we, being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members. (II, ii, ll. 3–13)

Notice that this passage contains as many metaphors, hideous though they be, as any other passage in Shakespeare’s dramatic verse.

When reading Shakespeare, paying attention to characters who suddenly break into rhymed verse, or who slip into prose after speaking in blank verse, will heighten your awareness of a character’s mood and personal development. For instance, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the famous military leader Marcus Antony usually speaks in blank verse, but also speaks in fits of prose (II, iii, ll. 43–46) once his masculinity and authority have been questioned. Similarly, in *Timon of Athens*, after the wealthy lord Timon abandons the city of Athens to live in a cave, he harangues anyone whom he encounters in prose (IV, iii, l. 331 ff.). In contrast, the reader should wonder why the bestial Caliban in *The Tempest* speaks in blank verse rather than in prose.

### **Implied Stage Action**

When we read a Shakespearean play, we are reading a performance text. Actors interact through dialogue, but at the same time these actors cry, gesticulate, throw tantrums, pick up daggers, and compulsively wash murderous “blood” from their hands. Some of the action that takes place on stage is explicitly stated in stage directions. However, some of the stage activity is couched within the dialogue itself. Attentiveness to these cues is important as one conceives how to visualize the action. When Iago in *Othello* feigns concern for Cassio whom he himself has stabbed, he calls to the surrounding men, “Come, come:/Lend me a light” (V, i, ll. 86–87). It is almost sure that one of the actors involved will bring him a torch or lantern. In the same play, Emilia, Desdemona’s maidservant, asks if she should fetch her lady’s nightgown and Desdemona replies, “No, unpin me here” (IV, iii, l. 37). In *Macbeth*, after killing Duncan, Macbeth brings the murder weapon back with him. When he tells his wife that he cannot return to the scene and place the daggers to suggest that the king’s guards murdered Duncan, she castigates him: “Infirm of purpose/Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures” (II, ii, ll. 50–52). As she exits, it is easy to visualize Lady Macbeth

grabbing the daggers from her husband.

For 400 years, readers have found it greatly satisfying to work with all aspects of Shakespeare's language—the implied stage action, word choice, sentence structure, and wordplay—until all aspects come to life. Just as seeing a fine performance of a Shakespearean play is exciting, staging the play in one's own mind's eye, and revisiting lines to enrich the sense of the action, will enhance one's appreciation of Shakespeare's extraordinary literary and dramatic achievements.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## List of Characters

Roderigo—A Venetian gentleman; rejected suitor to Desdemona

Iago—Newly appointed ensign to Othello, Moor of Venice

Brabantio—Venetian Senator; father to Desdemona

Othello—The Moorish General; husband to Desdemona

Cassio—Newly appointed lieutenant to Othello

Duke of Venice—Official who appoints Othello in charge of Cyprian mission

Desdemona—Wife to Othello; daughter to Brabantio

Montano—Retiring governor of Cyprus; predecessor to Othello in Cyprian government

Emilia—Wife to Iago; attendant to Desdemona

Clown—Servant to Othello

Bianca—A courtesan; mistress to Cassio

Gratiano—Venetian nobleman; brother to Brabantio

Lodovico—Venetian nobleman; kinsman to Brabantio

Senators—Officials who discuss Cyprian mission

Messengers—Deliver announcements during the play

Two Gentlemen—Converse with the governor

Third Gentleman—Bring news of the Turkish fleet

Herald—Othello's herald who reads a proclamation

Sailor—Brings message about Turkish fleet

Officers—Unnamed characters throughout the play who serve in the military.

Attendants—Unnamed characters throughout the play whose purpose is to serve the other characters.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Historical Background

The primary source for Othello is a short story from *Gli Hecatommithi*, a collection of tales published in 1565 by Geraldino Cinthio. The story from the collection dealing with “The Unfaithfulness of Husbands and Wives,” provides an ideal place for an Elizabethan dramatist to look for a plot. Since no translation of this work is known to have appeared before 1753, scholars believe that Shakespeare either read the work in its original Italian, or that he was familiar with a French translation of Cinthio’s tales, published in 1585 by Gabriel Chappuys.

In Cinthio’s tale, the wife is known as Desdemona, but the other characters are designated by titles only. There are also significant differences in the length of time over which the drama takes place, details of setting, and character’s actions.

Commentators have also suggested that Pliny’s *Natural History* provided Shakespeare with details to enhance Othello’s exotic adventures and his alien origins. It has even been suggested by Geoffrey Bullough that Shakespeare consulted John Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus’ *A Geographical History of Africa* which distinguishes between Moors of northern and southern Africa and characterizes both groups as candid and unaffected, but prone to jealousy. Shakespeare was also familiar with fifteenth and early sixteenth century accounts of wars between Venice and Turkey during which time Venice regained temporary control of Cyprus.

It is agreed by most scholars that Shakespeare wrote Othello in 1604, but some have suggested a composition date as early as 1603 or even 1602. The earliest recorded performance of the play was that by the King’s Men “in the Banqueting house at White Hall” on November 1, 1604. However, it is also possible that the play was performed earlier that year in a public theater.

Othello was first printed in Quarto form in 1622, and then in the First Folio of 1623; however, there are many variations between the texts of Q1 and F1. The First Folio contains approximately 160 lines that are not in the First Quarto, but it has notably fewer stage directions. In contrast, the First Quarto contains about 13 lines or partial lines not found in the First Folio. Despite the differences, textual commentators generally agree that the Folio edition was printed from a copy of the First Quarto, together with corrections and additions from some reliable manuscript, such as an acting company prompt-book.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Shakespearean tragedy was revived with leading actors such as Thomas Betterton and Barton Booth playing the role of Othello. Betterton was noted for the “moving and graceful energy with which Othello had addressed the Senate.” When Booth “wept, his tears broke from him perforce. He never whimpered, whined or blubbered; in his rage he never mouthed or ranted.”

In the nineteenth century, Edmund Kean was described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as having brought “flashes of lightning” to the interpretation of Shakespeare. Ira Aldridge, the most famous figure in black theater history, played Othello with Edmund Kean as his Iago. However natural a black Othello seems, at that time, it was a novelty to audiences for whom the tradition of a Berber chieftain went virtually unchallenged. Aldridge’s performance made a deep impression in America and abroad.

The twentieth century includes notable performances by Paul Robeson whose “tenderness, simplicity, and trust were deeply moving.” In 1964 Lawrence Olivier “took London by storm” with his portrayal of Othello. John Gielgud’s portrayal of “the disintegration of [Othello’s] character was traced with immense power and excellent variety.” Iago’s role as played by Christopher Plummer and Ian McKellen has been acclaimed.

Cinematic versions of Othello are impressive, as is Orson Welles’ 1952 interpretation, which has been described as “one of the screen’s sublime achievements” by Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*. The most recent interpretation of Othello is a film which includes Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## One–Page Summary

On a quiet night in Venice, Iago, ensign to the Moorish general, Othello, enlists the aid of Roderigo in his plot against Othello. Iago secretly hates Othello and tells Roderigo, a rejected suitor to Desdemona, that she has eloped with the Moor. After this revelation, Roderigo and Iago awaken Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, with news that she has been transported into Othello’s hands. Iago informs Othello of Brabantio’s anger. Brabantio arrives with officers to confront Othello, but they are interrupted by Michael Cassio who summons Othello to the Duke of Venice’s palace.

The duke and senators welcome Othello and inform him of his deployment to Cyprus in a defensive against the Ottomites. Brabantio accuses Othello of winning Desdemona’s affection by magic, after which Othello explains that he won Desdemona’s love by sincere means. Desdemona professes her duty to her husband. Subsequently, Othello is sent to Cyprus leaving Iago in charge of Desdemona’s safe passage to Cyprus along with Emilia, Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s attendant. Iago suggests that Roderigo follow Desdemona to Cyprus. Once alone, Iago reveals his plan to implicate Michael Cassio in a clandestine affair with Desdemona.

During a raging storm which destroys the Turkish fleet, Othello and his men land at the Cyprian seaport. By telling Roderigo a lie that Desdemona loves Cassio, Iago now urges Roderigo to incite Cassio to violence. Later that evening at Othello’s wedding feast, Iago gets Cassio drunk; as a result, Othello dismisses Cassio from service because of behavior unbecoming a lieutenant. Iago then encourages Cassio to appeal to Desdemona to influence Othello to reinstate Cassio.

Desdemona tells Cassio that she will help him. Cassio leaves quickly, and when Othello arrives, Desdemona pleads for Cassio. Iago uses Cassio’s quick exit and Desdemona’s pleas to cast doubt on her fidelity and Cassio’s integrity.

Desdemona and Emilia enter, and Othello admits to a headache. When Desdemona tries to assuage his illness with her handkerchief, he knocks it down. Emilia picks it up and gives it to Iago. When Othello demands visible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity, Iago asserts that he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief. Having become sufficiently suspicious, Othello vows revenge. Later, Cassio gives the handkerchief which Iago hid in Cassio’s room to Bianca, his jealous mistress, in order for her to copy.

Riled by Iago’s lies and innuendos, Othello succumbs to a trance. After he revives, Iago incites him anew by talking to Cassio about Bianca while Othello eavesdrops on the conversation. Mistakenly, Othello thinks Cassio is boasting about having seduced Desdemona. Bianca enters and throws the handkerchief at Cassio; consequently, Othello, convinced of Desdemona’s guilt, swears to kill her.

Lodovico, Brabantio's kinsman, arrives with orders from the duke for Othello to return to Venice, leaving Cassio in charge in Cyprus for which Desdemona expresses pleasure. Othello strikes her, and his actions give Iago cause to suggest that Othello is going mad. Iago then convinces Roderigo that killing Cassio will ensure his chances with Desdemona. Later in the evening, Othello orders Desdemona to wait for him alone in their bed chamber. As she prepares to retire, she sings a song about forsaken love.

At Iago's instigation, Roderigo attacks Cassio who in turn wounds Roderigo. Iago then stabs Cassio so that Othello thinks Iago has kept a promise to kill Cassio. When Roderigo cries out, Iago kills him.

In the bed chamber, while Othello ponders Desdemona's beauty and innocence, she awakens, and Othello commands her to pray before she dies. In spite of her supplications, he suffocates her with a pillow. Emilia enters, and Othello justifies his revenge by claiming the handkerchief as proof of her infidelity. Appalled at this act, Emilia reveals Iago's guilt. Iago enters, kills Emilia, and is arrested. Othello tries to kill Iago, and despite demands for an explanation, Iago remains silent and is led off. Before Othello is led off, he draws a concealed weapon, stabs himself, and kisses Desdemona as he dies.

### **Estimated Reading Time**

An average student should plan to spend at least one hour to read each act of the play for the first reading if the text used provides sufficient footnotes. Subsequent readings will take less time as familiarity with the vocabulary, the story line, and the writer's style increases. Othello comprises five acts with a total of 15 scenes, consequently the student might feel comfortable reading three to five scenes at each session, which would entail a total reading time of three to five hours.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Summary and Analysis**

1. [Act I, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis](#)
2. [Act II, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis](#)
3. [Act III, Scenes 1–4 Summary and Analysis](#)
4. [Act IV, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis](#)
5. [Act V, Scenes 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis](#)

### **Act I, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis**

#### **Act I, Scene 1**

##### **New Characters:**

Iago: newly appointed ensign to Othello, Moor of Venice

Roderigo: gentleman, disappointed suitor to Desdemona

Brabantio: Venetian Senator, father to Desdemona

#### **Summary**

One night on a street in Venice, Iago discloses to Roderigo the nature of his hatred for Othello, the Moor of Venice. It seems that in spite of the petitions of three influential Venetians, Othello has by-passed Iago for promotion to lieutenant. Instead, he has chosen Michael Cassio, a Florentine, and has appointed Iago to the

less important position of ensign. Iago then enlists the aid of Roderigo, a disappointed suitor to Desdemona, in waking Brabantio, Desdemona's father, with the disturbing news that his household has been robbed. Roderigo then proceeds to inform Brabantio that Desdemona has eloped with Othello. Brabantio recognizes Roderigo as the suitor he forbade to come to his home. Iago interjects Roderigo's information with images of animal lust and leaves telling Roderigo it would not be politic for him to stay, since he is officially Othello's inferior in rank.

### Analysis

When Roderigo responds to Iago by saying, "Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate," it is clear that Iago has previously mentioned his hatred for Othello. Consequently, Iago weaves an intricate plot to undo the Moor. What drives Iago throughout the play is a manipulative duplicity which is inherent in his nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called this aspect a "motiveless malignancy," since as the play progresses, Iago seems to be motivated by his pure evil rather than by any external factor or reason he may give for his actions.

The first pawn he enlists in his plan is Roderigo, who had been previously denied courtship of Desdemona by Brabantio. Playing on Roderigo's frustration, Iago gains his trust by telling him that he hates the Moor because Othello preferred to promote Michael Cassio as his honorable lieutenant.

We learn that in spite of the "personal suit" of three influential Venetians who interceded on Iago's behalf, Othello chose "a great arithmetician / One Michael Cassio" as his lieutenant. The biting tone Iago uses to describe Cassio reflects the contempt he feels for him. Moreover, Iago feels that Othello, "loving his own pride and purposes," chose to ignore the petitions of the noblemen and made his choice with "a bombast circumstance." The implication here is that Othello did not make his decision on appropriate grounds. Consequently, throughout his speech to Roderigo, Iago reveals not only his hatred for Othello, but also for Cassio. Iago feels that he has been denied promotion to lieutenant by a man "that never did set a squadron in the field, / Nor division of a battle knows." In addition, he ignores the fact that Othello chose Cassio precisely for this expertise as a tactical soldier and theorist. Iago's contempt for Cassio is evident in the way he demeans Cassio's abilities without recognizing that Othello's choice for lieutenant did not necessarily depend on field experience. Iago offers his own experience in battle "At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds" as concrete evidence that he should have been chosen lieutenant. This same jealousy and hatred for Cassio lends credibility to Iago's desire to include Cassio in the plan of destruction that emerges in the play.

Iago's speech also reveals his contention that "preferment goes by letter and affection" rather than by ability. Using himself as an example of how the system works, Iago professes his belief about duty and service. He believes that "we cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed," suggesting that Othello is not a master to be followed. In doing so, he begins to justify to himself all that he eventually does to undo the Moor. Iago reveals his contempt for what he sees as "many a duteous and knee-crooking knave" who spends his military career in service to an officer. Then, he indicates his admiration for others "who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, / Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves." Iago's contempt for the dutiful officer and his respect for the hypocrite reveal his own distorted views of duty and service in the military. He categorizes himself among the hypocrites and indicates that he will serve himself best by serving Othello.

Thus, it is no surprise when he says, "I am not what I am," to Roderigo as an assertion that his "outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure" of his heart "In compliment extern" in order to achieve his "peculiar end." This revelation establishes one of the recurring motifs in the play as Iago begins to present different faces to each character in order to win trust, gain confidence, and at the same time remain beyond reproach. When Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio and inform him of Desdemona's elopement, much of the contrasting imagery of black and white, lust and love, and illusion and reality is established.

Iago's first remark to Brabantio regarding Desdemona's whereabouts begins a series of images intended to shock Brabantio and rouse hatred for Othello. Iago tells Brabantio that "Even now, now, very now, an old

black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe.” The repetition of the word *now* stresses the immediacy of the action which Iago intends in order to create chaos and confusion. The animal imagery Iago evokes serves several purposes. First, it reveals Iago’s perception of love as an animal sexual act, a picture hardly appropriate to present to a father with respect to his daughter. Next, it degrades the love between Othello and Desdemona. Finally, it demonstrates that Iago will intentionally disregard another’s feelings to suit his purpose. In the three words *old*, *black*, and *ram*, Iago stresses Othello’s age, emphasizes his color, and strips him of his humanity in Brabantio’s presence.

To make the image more potent, Iago tells Brabantio that if something is not done immediately, “the devil will make a grandsire of you.” By comparing Othello to the devil, Iago suggests to Brabantio that Othello possesses a diabolical nature. As the conversation proceeds, it is clear that Brabantio, still not fully awake, has not felt the full impact of Iago’s words. Consequently, Iago plays on Brabantio’s confusion by stressing that if Brabantio does not act, he will have his “daughter covered with a Barbary horse.” Again Iago reduces love to an animal act devoid of its human component. With one final metaphor, Iago tells Brabantio that Desdemona and “the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” in order to incite him against Othello. In this reference, Iago chooses to avoid Othello’s name and, instead, refers to his ethnicity.

The success of Iago’s attempt to demean Othello is evident when Brabantio says, “This accident is not unlike my dream: / Belief of it oppresses me already,” and he calls for a search party. At this point Brabantio is so distraught that he questions whether what he has just learned is a dream or a reality.

## **Act I, Scene 2**

### **New Characters:**

Othello: Moor of Venice, husband to Desdemona

Cassio: Othello’s newly appointed lieutenant

Attendants: unnamed characters whose purpose is to serve the other characters

Officers: unnamed characters who serve in the military

### **Summary**

Before the Sagittary in Venice, Iago prepares Othello for Brabantio’s anger at the elopement of Desdemona and tells Othello that he resisted attacking Brabantio who spoke ill of him. Othello says that his reputation will speak for itself and asserts his sincere love for Desdemona. Michael Cassio then enters summoning Othello to the Duke of Venice for an urgent conference regarding a military expedition to Cyprus. Brabantio, Roderigo, and officers enter ready to attack Othello, but Othello makes it clear that there is no need to fight. Brabantio demands to know where Desdemona is and accuses Othello of winning her affection through the use of magic. Othello informs Brabantio that he has been summoned by the Duke; an officer concurs; and they all proceed to the conference.

### **Analysis**

The opening of this scene echoes the statement “I am not what I am” with which Iago previously revealed himself to Roderigo. As he speaks to Othello about Brabantio’s anger at the elopement of Desdemona, he cleverly plays on Othello’s trust in him. Accordingly he tells the Moor that because of Brabantio’s “scurvy and provoking terms” he could hardly keep himself from attacking Brabantio in defense of Othello. He presents himself to Othello in a favorable light which emphasizes the hypocrisy and duplicity of his nature. Othello asserts his love for Desdemona with the innocence and purity which Iago also intends to destroy. Subsequently Michael Cassio’s announcement that the duke requires the immediate service of Othello is a reminder of Othello’s untarnished reputation as a military man in service to the duke. In contrast, Brabantio’s abrupt entrance and attempt to discredit Othello’s sincerity by accusing him of winning Desdemona “with foul



charms” and “with drugs or minerals” suggests a racial aspect to his accusation.

Brabantio’s first reference to Othello as a “foul thief” reflects the influence Iago has had on Brabantio. In the previous scene, Roderigo and Iago awakened Brabantio with the declaration that his household had been robbed. This statement planted the image of Othello as a thief in Brabantio’s mind. Consequently, when Brabantio confronts Othello, “foul thief” seems to be an appropriate accusation. Brabantio cannot accept the fact that Desdemona would have gone with Othello of her own volition “if she in chains of magic were not bound.” It is as if this sort of supernatural or drug-induced seduction is the only one that would make sense—Brabantio is incredulous that Desdemona would have “shunn’d / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation” to “Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as Othello.” Brabantio’s reference to Othello as “such a thing” reduces him to a nonhuman entity, and the image of his “sooty bosom” recalls Iago’s emphasis on Othello’s skin color. There is a definite sense that the fact that Othello is an African makes this whole situation harder for Brabantio to accept, which is significant toward our understanding of Othello at this stage. Roderigo has already referred to Othello as “the thick-lips.” Later, Iago calls him “the black Othello,” pointing out the external features that separate Othello from the Venetian community.

### **Act I, Scene 3**

#### **New Characters:**

Duke of Venice: official who appoints Othello to Cyprus

Senators: officials who discuss Cyprian mission

Sailor: brings in a message about the Turkish fleet

Messenger: delivers messages to various characters throughout the play

Desdemona: daughter to Brabantio; wife to Othello

#### **Summary**

In a Senate chamber, the Duke of Venice and senators discuss the number of galleys comprising a Turkish fleet headed for Cyprus. A sailor enters with a message that the Turkish fleet is preparing for Rhodes, which the duke and senators agree may be a diversionary tactic. When a messenger enters with news from Montano, the Governor of Cyprus, that the Ottomites have joined the fleet at Rhodes, the duke and senators are convinced that Cyprus is in danger of attack. Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago, and Roderigo enter, and Brabantio tells the duke that Desdemona has been tricked by Othello who tells the duke that he did indeed win Desdemona’s affections, but not by any drugs or medicine. He tells how, as a guest in Brabantio’s house, his tales of dangerous adventure intrigued Desdemona and how her pity for his pains turned to love for him. Desdemona enters and respectfully establishes her dilemma as a “divided duty” between her father and Othello and asserts that her preference for her husband is natural “so much duty as my mother show’d / To you, preferring you before her father.” The matter is settled, and the duke assigns Othello to Cyprus. Desdemona suggests she go with him, and Othello leaves Iago in charge of Desdemona’s transport to Cyprus along with Emilia, Iago’s wife, as her attendant. Roderigo reasserts his love for Desdemona, and once he and Iago are alone, Iago convinces him that she will soon tire of the Moor and turn to Roderigo. Alone, Iago thinks of a ruse to suggest Desdemona’s infidelity with Cassio.

#### **Analysis**

The action of the play moves forward as the duke and the senators discuss the discrepancy of some reports from the Cyprian front. This event establishes the urgency for Othello’s assignment to Cyprus as his military duty interrupts his newly acquired duty as a husband to Desdemona. The timing of the event also takes the action to an exotic locale and places Othello in “most disastrous chances” not only in military terms but also in terms of Iago’s treacherous plot to destroy Othello and all that he represents. Othello’s implicit trust in Iago

leaves him vulnerable to Iago's malevolent nature, and in order for Iago's plotting to be credible, his attempts at gaining everyone's trust must be successful.

Brabantio's claim to the duke that Othello used "spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" to entrap Desdemona is contradicted by Othello's "round unvarnished tale" of how he sincerely won Desdemona's love and affection. Desdemona's subsequent assertion that she "profess / Due to the Moor" clearly establishes that Othello is what he appears to be. Brabantio's accusation that Othello is "an abuser of the world, a practicer / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant" along with Iago's previous attempts to demean Othello to Roderigo contain the racial charge that Othello must have used some kind of magic or sorcery to seduce Desdemona. His accusation assumes that this is the only reason she would bypass "the wealthy curled darlings" of Venice for a man of a different race.

Othello's speech to the Senate reveals the honest, unaffected manner with which he presents himself as he opens his address with "Most potent, brave, and reverend signiors / My very noble, and approved good masters." Othello answers Brabantio's charge by acknowledging his marriage to Desdemona not by denying it. His tone is sincere and not defensive, and he demonstrates humility without ingratiating himself before the esteemed council. Othello is aware of his unsophisticated speech and manner when he says "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace." However, he maintains his dignity while speaking with the impressive Venetian council as he "will a round unvarnished tale deliver" about how he won Desdemona. At this point Brabantio is quick to interject his belief that Desdemona must have been tricked by some magic because "in spite of nature / Of years, of country, credit, everything" she defied all logic and fell in love with Othello. Othello continues his speech with his story of "battles, sieges, fortunes" through "rough quarries, rocks, and hills," and the pattern in his speech reflects a rhythm that echoes the adventurous spirit with which Desdemona fell in love.

According to Othello, when he told his adventurous tales "of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders," Desdemona became enthralled and "with a greedy ear" would "devour up [his] discourse." After hearing a few tales, Desdemona wanted to know more, so Othello took the time to tell her. At such stories, Desdemona would express sympathy and compassion for his hardships and in the end felt "'twas strange, 'twas passing strange; / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful." Her reaction suggests the awe she felt and the admiration she showed for his dangerous deeds. Othello concludes that Desdemona "loved [him] for the dangers [he] had passed," and he in turn "loved her that she did pity him." Such is his "witchcraft." Even the duke comments to Brabantio, "I think this tale would win my daughter too," attesting to the veracity of Othello's story.

When Desdemona is called upon to explain where she "owes obedience," she replies with respect toward her father and confidence in what she believes. In a convincing statement, Desdemona admits obedience to her father "for life and education" but as a wife she must "profess / Due to the Moor." It is clear that Desdemona made her decision to marry Othello in a rational state of mind rather than in the drug-induced state of mind for which Othello has been held responsible. Her "divided duty" does not negate her responsibility as a daughter, but only adds another responsibility as a wife. Desdemona reminds her father that this same preference was made once by her mother. Desdemona's pronouncement supports Othello's story, and Brabantio has no choice but to drop the issue of Othello's witchcraft.

When Othello entrusts Desdemona to Iago for safe passage to Cyprus, he unwittingly places himself in a position to become a pawn in Iago's web of deceit as evinced by Iago's comment that "the Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by the nose / As asses are."

At the end of Scene 3, Iago expresses his attitude toward love when Roderigo hints at drowning himself because he cannot live without Desdemona. Roderigo says he is ashamed of being so in love, yet "it is not in

[his] virtue to amend it.” Iago’s immediate reaction to Roderigo’s lack of will indicates the attitude that what we are determined by our own will. At this point, it is clear that Iago himself determines the evil he perpetrates. There are no extenuating circumstances. For Iago, a man’s reason controls the baser instincts of which love is “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.” Iago cannot comprehend love in terms of its virtue because he cannot rise above the level of his own baseness. From his vantage point, he debases all the goodness he sees around him. Consequently, Othello and Desdemona’s love to him is “a violent commencement” which will result in “an answerable sequestration.” Iago suggests that Othello will tire of Desdemona and “the food that to him now is as luscious as locusts” will become “shortly as bitter as coloquintida.” Likewise, when Desdemona “is sated with his body,” she will turn to someone else. The specific imagery of food and appetite with respect to love is significant because it points out that Iago reduces love to merely a sexual appetite void of emotion.

To give further insight into his nature, Iago states a reason for his hatred of Othello in a brief soliloquy. He says, “it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He has done my service” implying that Othello committed adultery with Emilia. Rumor is as sufficient as truth to breed hatred in Iago. Perhaps his own growing jealousy motivates him to create jealousy in Othello.

As Iago takes into account all that he has observed, he realizes that his best access to Othello lies in Othello’s trust. Iago feels no compunction about betraying that trust as a means to an end. This behavior is consistent with what we have seen of him thusfar.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act II, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis**

### **Act II, Scene 1**

#### **New Characters:**

Montano: Governor of Cyprus

Two Gentlemen: converse with the governor

A third Gentlemen: brings news of the Turkish fleet

Emilia: wife to Iago; attendant to Desdemona

#### **Summary**

At a seaport in Cyprus, near the harbor, Montano and two gentlemen discuss the storm raging off the coast. A third gentleman enters with news that the storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet and that Michael Cassio has arrived. Cassio enters expressing hopes for Othello’s safe arrival in Cyprus. A messenger arrives with the news of the arrival of another ship, and Cassio directs the second gentleman to find out whose it is. The second gentleman re-enters announcing the arrival of Iago’s ship. Desdemona enters, asking Cassio for news of Othello, and he assures her that Othello is well. Desdemona and Emilia engage in some banter with Iago, and after the word play, Iago carefully notices how Michael Cassio courteously greets Desdemona.

Othello then enters content that the war is over and jubilant at seeing Desdemona safe. Subsequently, he directs everyone to the castle and tells Iago to disembark the spoils of war. Alone with Roderigo, Iago tells him that Desdemona is in love with Cassio and that when her appetite for the Moor wanes, Cassio is the one to whom she will turn. Roderigo expresses disbelief at this observation, so Iago describes the warm greeting Cassio gave Desdemona. Next, he urges Roderigo to instigate Cassio to anger and provoke him to a fight. He

convinces Roderigo that once Cassio is removed, he will have a better chance with Desdemona. Alone, Iago expresses his suspicion of Emilia's infidelity with Othello, his desire for revenge, and his plan to have Othello trust him more.

### Analysis

The opening scene of this act serves several dramatic functions. First, Montano's discussion with the two gentlemen provides a panoramic view of the intensity of the storm with "a high-wrought flood," "the wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane," and "the enchafed flood." The imagery used to describe the sea suggests the fury of a wild beast with which it rages. Consequently, portraying a storm of this magnitude would present a difficulty on the Elizabethan stage. This description also makes plausible the news that the storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet. In addition, the scene justifies Cassio's concern for Othello when he says, "O let the heavens / Give him defense against the elements / For I have lost him on a dangerous sea!" The irony here is that Othello's enemy is not the war nor the sea but Iago who has safely landed in Cyprus. Cassio's comment that "Tempests themselves...the guttered rocks...congregated sands, / Traitors...as having a sense of beauty, do omit / Their mortal natures" personifies a treacherous sea with a benevolent nature in sparing Desdemona. This image contrasts the malevolent nature of Iago who is a traitor sparing no one to undo Othello.

To offset the intensity of the opening of the act, Desdemona and Emilia engage in some light humor with Iago prompted by Cassio's greeting of Emilia. After Cassio kisses Emilia, Iago remarks, "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough." This quip begins a series of "praises" of women by Iago under the guise of light banter with serious overtones that suit Iago's duplicity as one who says one thing yet means another, even in humor. After the ironic word play, Iago carefully notices how Cassio greets Desdemona when he "takes her by the palm ...smile[s] upon her ...kissed [his] three fingers so oft" in a gallant gesture. Iago takes this innocent gesture and gives it an evil motive later to convince Roderigo of their secret love. Iago's comment that "with as little a web as this I will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" suggests the image of a spider weaving a web to trap its victim. Like the spider, Iago is weaving a web of deceit to capture the unsuspecting Cassio.

Othello enters and expresses his joy at seeing Desdemona; Desdemona reciprocates the feeling. In an aside Iago remarks, "you are well tuned now! / But I'll set down pegs that make this music / Honest as I am." The music imagery suggested by his comment is that Desdemona and Othello are instruments to be played upon and manipulated. Again Iago takes something pure and debases it.

In the last part of the scene, Iago uses Cassio's courtly greeting of Desdemona as proof of their love. When Roderigo expresses disbelief, Iago says that when the same appetite with which she loved Othello "is made dull with the act of sport" she will turn to Cassio. Again, Iago expresses his view that Desdemona's attraction for Othello is an appetite wherein "her eyes must be fed." When Roderigo still expresses disbelief, Iago adds, "Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?" intimating that this innocent greeting is an act of lechery. Having cast sufficient doubt about Desdemona's virtue, Iago instructs Roderigo to "find some occasion to anger Cassio...provoke him that he may" strike Roderigo to insure the dislodging of Cassio.

In his soliloquy, Iago reveals the motivation which compels him to plan and execute his devious plot. Once again, Iago takes inventory of what he has observed as he did at the end of Act I, Scene 3. He believes Cassio loves Desdemona and that Desdemona loves Cassio. This is true. However, their love is not adulterous; it is a genuine cordiality for one another. Eventually, Iago will cast dubious motives on this mutual affection in order to suit his own needs. Iago also believes that Othello is "of a constant, loving, noble nature." This is also true, and it becomes the means through which Iago gains access to Othello's vulnerability. Iago even goes as far as to say he loves Desdemona "not out of absolute lust," but merely as a means to feed his own plan of revenge. As his scheme begins to take shape, his suspicions about Emilia's fidelity "gnaw [his] inwards." This

glimpse into Iago's feelings provide the reason for his insatiable appetite for revenge which "nothing can or shall content" until he is "evened with him." The details of Iago's scheme begin to materialize, yet they are not completely solid. If he can't prove Desdemona false, he hopes at least to incite Othello's jealousy to the point at which reason will not abate it. He will get Cassio at a disadvantage and demean him to Othello in such a way that Othello will trust Iago more. Iago adds parenthetically that he even suspects Cassio's adultery with Emilia. Perhaps the jealousy that Iago hopes to instill in Othello is a projection of his own unbridled jealousy for which he has no solid basis. Iago says that his plan "tis here, but yet confused. / Knavery's plain face is never seen till used." He personifies his scheme as if it were a partner of his whose face is indistinct until such time as they meet with mutual purpose.

## **Act II, Scene 2**

### **New Character:**

Herald: Othello's herald who reads a proclamation

### **Summary**

In this brief scene before Othello's castle, a Herald enters reading a proclamation of Othello's plans for a feast to honor the defeat of the Turkish fleet and to celebrate his marriage to Desdemona.

### **Analysis**

The dramatic purpose of this scene is, of course, to establish the celebration for the victory over the Turkish fleet and Othello's marriage to Desdemona. However, it also serves as an ironic backdrop for Iago's treachery which is going to be acted out on the streets of Cyprus as Iago sets his trap to discredit Cassio to Montano and Othello.

## **Act II, Scene 3**

### **Summary**

Othello and Desdemona enter the castle along with Cassio and attendants. Othello directs Cassio to stand guard and not to overdo the celebrating, and Cassio replies that he will personally see to it. Othello then informs Cassio that he will speak to him tomorrow and exits with Desdemona. Iago then enters, and Cassio informs him that they should stand watch to which Iago replies that Othello has dismissed them early. Next, he urges Cassio to have a drink to Othello with the other young men who are celebrating, but Cassio informs him that he has already drunk enough. However, at Iago's insistence, Cassio goes off to get the others. Alone Iago says that if Cassio is drunk, he will be easily provoked to argument with Roderigo and the three other men who have been drinking.

Cassio, Montano, and a gentleman enter, and Iago engages Cassio in some toasting and singing. When Cassio exits, Iago tells Montano that Cassio's weakness is drinking to which Montano replies that Othello should be informed. Cassio, drunk, enters chasing Roderigo who has provoked a fight at Iago's prompt. In an attempt to stop Cassio's attack on Roderigo, Montano takes Cassio's arm after which Cassio verbally threatens Montano and fights with him. Othello enters during the scuffle and breaks it up. When he asks what is going on, Iago says that while he and Montano were speaking a fellow came crying for help while being chased by Cassio. Iago adds that Montano tried to stop Cassio while he himself pursued the other who got away. When he returned, he found Montano and Cassio fighting until Othello parted them. Othello dismisses Cassio from service, and all but Cassio and Iago exit. Cassio bemoans his reputation, and Iago tells him that he should go to Desdemona to plead his case. Alone, Iago schemes to suggest to Othello that Desdemona lusts after Cassio.

When Roderigo enters, he is disillusioned and says that he is going back to Venice. However, Iago tells him to be patient, because the plan is in action. Finally, Iago decides to have Emilia intercede with Desdemona for Cassio and to have Othello find Cassio speaking to Desdemona.

## Analysis

This scene focuses on Iago's plan to get Cassio involved in a compromising position and sully his reputation. First, he blatantly contradicts Othello's order to Cassio "to look...to the guard tonight" by telling Cassio that Othello "cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona." After establishing a brief conversation about Desdemona, Iago suggests that Cassio "have a measure to the health of black Othello" to which Cassio replies that he has "very poor and unhappy brains for drinking." However, with some encouragement by Iago, Cassio assents. Iago's treachery is clear when he says, "'mongst this flock of drunkards / Am I to put our Cassio in some action / That may offend the isle."

To further his plan, Iago engages Cassio in rounds of drinking and toasting with Montano and the others. Iago uses this as proof to Montano that Cassio is "a soldier fit to stand by Caesar," but his vice "Tis to his virtue a just equinox" to discredit Cassio's suitability as Othello's lieutenant. Iago's plan culminates in this scene when Cassio re-enters chasing Roderigo threatening to "beat the knave into a twiggen bottle." When Montano intercedes on Roderigo's behalf, Cassio threatens to "knock [him] o'er the mazzard." When Othello enters, stops the fight, and demands an explanation, Iago recounts the incidents and says, "I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth / Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio." The irony here, as in many of Iago's speeches, is clear. His statement belies all that he has contrived to discredit Cassio. The humiliation of Cassio is complete when Othello says, "Cassio I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine." After his dismissal, Cassio laments the loss of his reputation which gives Iago another opportunity to dishonor Cassio. Iago tells him to seek Desdemona and "importune her help to put you in your place again."

In yet another attempt to disgrace Cassio in Othello's eyes, Iago says that "whiles this honest fool / Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune / ... I'll pour...into [Othello's] ear / That she repeals him for her body's lust." By this time, Iago's plan is becoming more involved as he makes use of coincidence to further his scheme. He is also more determined in his approach as he calls his lies "this pestilence" to be poured into Othello's ear. This comment suggests a scene from Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, in which a troop of players enact "The Murder of Gonzago." In the play-within-a-play, the murderer pours poison into the king's ear while he sleeps in a re-creation of King Hamlet's murder. An Elizabethan audience would not miss the image since the ear was believed to provide access for poisonous substances to enter the body. Iago's poison consists of the lies he plans to tell Othello little by little as if administering drops of poison into his body. Since Othello listens intently to what Iago says, the metaphor is an appropriate one for Iago to create.

As Iago envisions this plan, he relishes the opportunity to turn Desdemona's "virtue into pitch." The contrast of black and white is evident in this image as Iago hopes to defile Desdemona's goodness. The black/white contrast also emphasizes the color difference between Desdemona and Othello which has been a source of contention with Brabantio's acceptance of Othello and Iago's hatred for him. In this scene, it is clear that Iago manipulates situations to suit his needs, and he takes harmless situations and presents them in an evil light. His soliloquy reveals that once again "knavery's plain face" becomes clear to him as he decides to use Desdemona's own innocence and virtue against her by making "the net / That shall enmesh them all." This image that Iago creates suggests the catch a fisherman might make when he hauls in a net containing a plentiful supply of fish. Like the fisherman, Iago ensnares the unsuspecting characters in his net of trickery and deceit.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act III, Scenes 1–4 Summary and Analysis**

### **Act III, Scene 1**

#### **New Character:**

Clown: comedic figure from the castle; servant to Othello

#### **Summary**

In this scene before Othello's castle, Cassio enters with two musicians and tells them he will pay them to serenade Othello and Desdemona. A clown enters and comments on the musicians' instruments and tells them that Othello does not want to hear any more music. After the musicians leave, Cassio asks the clown to tell Emilia he wants to see Desdemona. Iago enters and Cassio tells him what he just asked the clown, and Iago tells him he will go get Emilia, and he will keep Othello away. Emilia enters and tells Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are discussing the incident between Cassio and Montano and that she will arrange a meeting.

#### **Analysis**

This scene provides some comic relief from the drama that has transpired in the previous act. Cassio's request for the musicians to serenade Othello and Desdemona reflects the Elizabethan custom of awakening people of high rank with serenades on special occasions. When they play, a clown comes out and comments on the quality of their music by asking, "Why, masters, have your instruments been at Naples, that they speak i' th' nose thus?" An Elizabethan audience would be quick to pick up on the bawdy pun on the word *instruments* and the suggestion of the poor health conditions of the city of Naples. The clown then sarcastically says that Othello likes the music so much, he will pay the musicians to stop. After Iago enters, Cassio tells him he requested to see Desdemona, and Iago says he will "devise a means to draw the Moor / Out of the way" so they can speak more freely. Iago makes it seem as if he is helping Iago's cause; whereas, in reality he is setting up the situation for Othello to find Cassio and Desdemona speaking. When Emilia tells Cassio that Desdemona "speaks for [him] stoutly," Cassio hopes that his conversation with her will then prove fruitful.

### **Act III, Scene 2**

#### **Summary**

Within the castle, Othello gives Iago letters to deliver to the senate. Othello and gentlemen walk along the fortress walls.

#### **Analysis**

This brief scene presents Othello in a situation where he carries out the duties of the office as a commander.

### **Act III, Scene 3**

#### **Summary**

In the garden of the castle, Desdemona tells Cassio that she will do all she can to help him. Emilia adds that Iago is just as distressed by the whole incident. Othello and Iago enter as Cassio leaves, and Iago suggests that there is something suspicious in the way he left. Desdemona asks Othello to call Cassio back, but he says he will speak to him some other time. She insists and pleads Cassio's case, so having enough, Othello says he'll give her what she wants, and asks to be left alone. Iago asks about Cassio's familiarity with Desdemona, and Othello tells him he was in their company many times when they were courting. Othello asks Iago to tell him his thoughts, as vile as they may be, so Iago tells him to watch out for jealousy. Othello says he'll need more to doubt her, so Iago tells him to observe Desdemona with Cassio and adds that most Venetian women are deceptive using Desdemona's elopement as proof of how she deceived Brabantio. Othello vacillates between doubt and certainty of Desdemona, and Iago leaves him with his thoughts.

Desdemona enters to tell him the dinner guests are waiting, and Othello replies that he has a headache. Desdemona proceeds to wipe his brow with her handkerchief, but when he pushes it away, the handkerchief drops. Emilia picks it up, and when Iago enters she says she has the handkerchief which Iago immediately

snatches from her. Othello returns and asks for more tangible proof of her infidelity. Iago mentions that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief. At this, Othello swears vengeance and Iago agrees to help him. They discuss the death of Michael Cassio.

### Analysis

When Emilia comments that the rift between Othello and Cassio “grieves [her] husband / As if the cause were his” we see how Iago has managed to deceive his own wife who doesn’t suspect the evil in his nature. This is an example of dramatic irony in which the character is not aware of vital information as the audience or reader is. Desdemona’s further remark, with reference to Iago, “that’s an honest fellow,” is as ironic because she is not aware of the treachery being connived either. Iago and Othello enter, and Iago says “Ha! I like not that,” with reference to Cassio’s leaving. When Othello asks him if that was Cassio he saw leaving, Iago replies with feigned uncertainty that he thinks not “that he would steal away so guilty-like” suggesting that there is something inappropriate in Cassio’s visit with Desdemona. The conversation that follows between Othello and Iago consists of a series of half thoughts and insinuations by Iago to raise Othello’s suspicions about Cassio. As they speak, Othello comments how Iago “didst contract and purse [his] brow together, / As if [he] then [had] shut up in [his] brain / Some horrible conceit.” The gestures suggested by Othello’s statements are carefully orchestrated by Iago to generate more curiosity and prompt Othello to say “Show me thy thought” which gives Iago the opportunity he wants to plant his “worst of thoughts / The worst of words” in Othello’s mind. Iago responds with the admonition to “beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on.” When Othello expresses doubt about there being anything to be jealous of, “For she had eyes and chose me,” he says to Iago, “when I doubt, prove.” To weaken Othello’s confidence, Iago replies, “observe her well with Cassio...I know our country disposition well / In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands.” He seizes upon the opportunity to play upon the fact that Othello is an exotic by suggesting that he is not aware of the deceptive ways of Venetian women. He adds, “She did deceive her father, marrying you,” so much so that Brabantio “thought ’twas witchcraft. Iago uses Othello’s susceptibility to the belief in magic to feed his doubts. Iago raises the issue of Othello’s cultural differences with Desdemona which leads Othello to ponder his color, degree of sophistication, and age as he says that perhaps “For I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation ...or ...am declined / Into the vale of years.”

The conversation has left Othello in a highly charged emotional state, so when Desdemona enters, he tells her he has a headache, and she replies, “let me bind it hard,” with her handkerchief, the “first remembrance from the Moor.” He pushes the handkerchief away, and it falls to the ground. Emilia picks it up, and Iago immediately snatches it when he enters. This gives him the unexpected “ocular proof” which Othello soon demands in order to be convinced of Desdemona’s infidelity.

In a brief soliloquy, Iago recognizes the effect he is having as “the Moor already changes with my poison.” Iago continues the metaphor he created in Act II, Scene 3 in which he compared his lies to a pestilence he would pour into Othello’s ear. At this point in his scheme, Iago has sufficiently aroused Othello’s jealousy so that all the undetectable ministrations of poison “which at the first were scarce found to distaste” have begun to “burn like the mines of sulphur” as they course through Othello’s body. Iago is convinced that “not poppy, nor mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep.” Othello has received a lethal dose of Iago’s poison, so that all the restoratives in the world cannot counter the fatal effects.

What follows next in the scene is a cleverly manipulated conversation once Iago has caused Othello to have serious doubts about Desdemona’s fidelity. When Othello returns, it is clear that he has been plagued by doubts as evident in his remark “Ha! Ha! False to me?” Iago’s poison is manifesting itself in Othello’s mind, but Iago understates its effect with his emphatic “Why, how now, General. No more of that!” Othello tries to convince himself that what he doesn’t see will not harm him, even “if the general camp...had tasted her body.” However, at this thought Othello loses touch with reality and fears he is losing his mind, the very source of



pride in for his career as a military leader. When his senses return he demands “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity beyond a doubt. Othello warns Iago that if he “dost slander her and torture me” may he be damned for ever.

This scene represents the turning point for Othello as he borders on doubt and certainty with respect to Desdemona’s fidelity and Iago’s honesty. This is exactly the point of vulnerability Iago needs to ensure that his plan will work. Iago comments that Othello is “eaten up with passion,” and he proceeds to conjure images of animal lust to rouse Othello even further. By evoking scenes of Desdemona and Cassio “as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride,” Iago heightens Othello’s jealousy and desire for proof of her infidelity. Iago abuses Othello’s trust by pretending to be painfully honest in that he heard Cassio cry out, “Sweet Desdemona!” in his sleep. Consequently, Othello’s rage manifests itself with his threat “to tear her to pieces.” Iago hypocritically suggests that “she may be honest yet” and then plants the lie that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona’s handkerchief. Given the significance of the handkerchief to Othello, it is no surprise that Othello’s rage turns to vengeance as he exclaims, “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow Hell!” Othello, “eaten up with passion,” vows revenge and tells Iago he wants to “hear thee say / That Cassio’s not alive.” This scene progresses from Iago’s planting seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind to Othello’s vowing vengeance with Cassio’s death and “some swift means of death for the fair devil.”

### **Act III, Scene 4**

#### **New Character:**

Bianca: mistress to Cassio

#### **Summary**

Desdemona asks a clown where Cassio is so that he can be told that Othello is moved considering the incident. She wonders where her handkerchief is, and Emilia says she does not know. Othello enters and asks for the handkerchief because he has a cold, and Desdemona admits that she does not have it with her. Othello gets upset and berates her. Emilia suggests that he may be jealous, and Desdemona says she does not know him to be jealous. Iago and Cassio enter, and Cassio urges Desdemona to quicken his plea with Othello to which Desdemona replies that Othello is not himself and that Cassio should be patient. Iago then inquires about Othello and goes off to meet him. Desdemona imagines that something must be weighing on Othello to make him act the way he has, and believes that it is not her fault. She and Emilia go off to find Othello so that Desdemona can plead his case. Bianca enters and wants to know why Cassio has not seen her for a week, and he tells her that he has some pressing issues. He gives her the handkerchief, and she accuses him of getting it from another woman. He tells her he found it in his chamber and would like her to copy the design.

#### **Analysis**

The clown, who is Othello’s servant, in this scene provides some comic relief to offset the intensity of the previous scene. When Desdemona asks him if he knows “where Lieutenant Cassio lies” he responds by saying “I dare not say he lies anywhere...He’s a soldier; and for one to say a soldier lies is stabbing.” The pun on the word lie is made when Desdemona asks for Cassio’s whereabouts, but the clown responds as if she had called him a liar. The dramatic irony with this pun is clear because Iago’s whole scheme is based on the lie of Desdemona’s infidelity.

Othello enters and asks for the handkerchief. The significance of the handkerchief to Othello becomes clear because he talks about how it was given to his mother by an Egyptian who “was a charmer and could read / The thoughts of people.” He adds that there is “magic in the web of it.” Othello’s comments point out his susceptibility to the suggestion of charms and spells as a cultural trait, and makes Iago’s manipulation of Othello more devious because he plays on Othello’s vulnerability. The possible loss of the handkerchief infuriates Othello because, according to the spell woven in it, “To lose’t or give’t away wer such perdition / As nothing else could match.” His strong reaction prompts Emilia to ask Desdemona if he were jealous to which Desdemona responds that she “ne’er saw this before.” Emilia’s subsequent comment that jealousy is “a

monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself” echoes Iago’s previous warning to Othello. However, Emilia is not motivated out of evil, but rather genuine concern for Desdemona. The incident is also a prelude to more of the behavior which is being manipulated by Iago. Desdemona is innocent of all deceit, so it is not surprising that she would believe Othello’s change is caused by “something...of state / Either from Venice or some unhatched practice...in Cyprus.”

When Iago and Cassio enter, Cassio asks Desdemona to hurry with her plea to Othello, and she says she will do what she can. Desdemona is not aware that this action will fulfill Iago’s admonition to Othello in the previous scene to “Note if your lady strains his entertainment / With any stronger or vehement importunity.”

At the end of the scene, the handkerchief becomes more significant because Cassio gives it to Bianca for her to copy its design. Iago’s attempt to plant it in Cassio’s lodging was successful, and Cassio inadvertently becomes trapped in the plot.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act IV, Scenes 1–3 Summary and Analysis**

### **Act IV, Scene 1**

#### **New Character:**

Lodovico: a Venetian nobleman, kinsman to Brabantio

#### **Summary**

Before Othello’s castle, Iago presents images of Desdemona’s infidelity to Othello until he is overcome with emotion and falls into a trance. Cassio enters and asks what is wrong. Iago tells him that Othello has fallen into a fit of epilepsy and will speak to him later. Othello revives, and Iago tells him that Cassio came but will return. Moreover, he tells Othello to hide himself and watch Cassio’s gestures as Iago speaks to him. When Cassio returns, Iago engages him in a conversation about Bianca, but Othello believes Cassio to be speaking about Desdemona and becomes furious. Bianca then enters complaining about the handkerchief he gave her to copy. Othello is convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful and vows revenge. A trumpet announces the arrival of Lodovico, a Venetian nobleman, who brings letters from the Duke of Venice instructing Othello to return and appointing Cassio in his place. Desdemona, who also arrived, is pleased at this, and an enraged Othello strikes her. Lodovico, surprised at the change in Othello, inquires as to its cause.

#### **Analysis**

Iago continues to play upon the jealousy that he has generated in Othello with images of “a kiss in private” and “to be naked with her friend in bed.” He adds that giving away a handkerchief is a visible act and suggests that honor can be given away and not seen. This reminds Othello of what Iago had previously said and “would most gladly have forgot it!” Iago does not want him to forget it and intensifies the pressure by saying that Cassio said he did “lie...with her, on her; what you will.” At this point Othello is so overcome with emotion that he falls into a trance and Iago triumphantly says, “Work on / My medicine work!” relishing what his evil has wrought upon Othello. When Cassio enters, Iago creates the occasion to set up another damaging situation. When Othello revives and Iago informs him that Cassio will return, he tells Othello to “encave yourself / And mark the fleers, the gibes, the notable scorns / That dwell in every region of his face” as he prepares Othello for deception once more. When Cassio returns, Iago talks about Bianca so that Othello can conclude that Cassio’s disparaging remarks are about Desdemona. Ironically, what adds more credibility to this seeming love affair is when Bianca enters and berates Cassio for giving her “some minx’s token” to copy. Othello believes this to be Desdemona’s handkerchief, and his response is to “Hang her!...chop her into

messes, and poison her” expressing the degree which his emotions have reached. However, Iago suggests that he “strangle her in bed, even the bed she hath contaminated,” a suggestion which foreshadows the dramatic climax of the play.

The end of the scene establishes the overt changes in Othello that have occurred over a short period of time. When Desdemona learns that Othello is commissioned back to Venice and Michael Cassio has been appointed in his stead, she is happy for Michael, but Othello interprets her genuine feeling as proof of their love. He strikes her, and Lodovico questions, “Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature whom passion could not shake?” It is clear that the “pestilence” with which Iago has infected Othello has not only changed the way he thinks but also the way he acts.

## **Act IV, Scene 2**

### **Summary**

Within the castle, Othello asks Emilia if she ever heard or saw anything suspicious when Desdemona and Cassio were together. Emilia contends that Desdemona is honest, and Othello tells her to go get Desdemona. When Emilia exits, Othello says that Emilia cannot be taken at her word. When Emilia and Desdemona enter, Othello calls Desdemona a whore, and she is confused at this accusation because she is innocent. She wants to know what could she have done to get him into such a state. Emilia re-enters and Desdemona asks her to go get Iago. Emilia returns with Iago, and Desdemona asks him what she could do to win back Othello’s respect. He tells her that the cause is some business of the state. Next, Roderigo enters and tells Iago that he is tired of being put off

by Iago’s schemes for him to win Desdemona. Iago quickly enlists Roderigo in a further scheme to kill Cassio before Othello leaves Cyprus.

### **Analysis**

Othello’s suspicions about Cassio and Desdemona have been aroused to the point that he asks Emilia “You have seen nothing then?” When she says she has not, she also tells him that “if any wretch have put this in your head / Let heaven requite it with the serpent’s curse!” Her statement is another example of irony because neither she nor Othello recognize how true her charge is. When Desdemona enters, and Othello accuses her of being a whore, she is taken aback and wonders why he is acting so belligerently. When she admits only innocence he says “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello.” This interaction between the two of them is a direct contrast to a previous scene in which they were both overjoyed at seeing each other on Cyprus. The conversation underscores the drastic change Othello has undergone with Iago’s insidious plan, and it emphasizes the deterioration of his belief in her fidelity. Ironically, Emilia adds that she believes “some most villainous knave, / Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow” has affected Othello to which Iago tells her to watch her words. She uses as support for her belief that “some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor.” This comment alludes to Iago’s suspicion in Act II, Scene 1 and suggests that Iago is determined to make Othello, who is not inherently jealous, as jealous as he himself is.

When Roderigo enters, he is impatient at being stalled by Iago’s schemes for him to win Desdemona. He says that “the jewels you have had from me to deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a votarist.” Iago swindled Roderigo out of his possessions to use as gifts which he never delivered to Desdemona. He placates Roderigo’s anger with a scheme to remove Cassio by “knocking out his brains” before Othello leaves Cyprus to make Roderigo think that Cassio is the obstacle between Desdemona and him.

## **Act IV, Scene 3**

### **Summary**

In another room, Othello leads Lodovico from the castle and tells Desdemona to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia because he will return shortly. Desdemona senses something awry and sings a “willow song” about forsaken love and death. This prompts Desdemona to ask Emilia if there really are women who deceive their

husbands, and Emilia replies that there are no doubt some such women. Desdemona asks Emilia if she would betray her husband to which Emilia responds that she wouldn't for trivial gain but would to make him a king. Desdemona insists she would never betray Othello. Emilia proceeds to tell her that the reason women fall is that their husbands neglect and are insensitive to them.

### **Analysis**

The dominant impression in this scene is one of foreboding and imminent disaster. As Othello leads Lodovico away, he tells Desdemona to "Get you to bed on th' instant. I will be returned forthwith. Dismiss your attendant." Othello wants Desdemona alone so he can carry out his revenge, and she obeys his directive. After Othello leaves, Desdemona says that she has been preoccupied with a "willow" song about her mother's maid "who was in love; and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her." Desdemona sings this song which foreshadows her death. The song then prompts Desdemona to ask Emilia if there are men who abuse women and Emilia replies "there be some such, no question" which is ironic because Emilia is not aware that Iago is abusing her. In a discussion of what makes women betray their husbands, Emilia presents her opinion that "I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall...The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." Emilia's comment suggests men's treatment of women is responsible for the success or failure of a relationship, an idea which echoes the spirit of independence which Elizabeth I instilled in her people during her reign.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act V, Scenes 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis**

### **Act V, Scene 1**

#### **New Character:**

Gratiano: Venetian nobleman; brother to Brabantio

### **Summary**

On a street in Cyprus, Iago tells Roderigo to hide and attack Cassio as he walks by. However, when Cassio enters, Roderigo's attempt fails, and Cassio wounds him. Iago sneaks up behind Cassio and stabs him in the leg. Othello enters, hears Cassio's cries, and concludes that Iago has kept his word and killed Cassio. Lodovico and Gratiano enter at the confusion and comment on the cries for help coming from the street. Iago appears and asks them who is crying for help. Cassio then appears, is recognized, and says that whoever stabbed him is in the area. Roderigo cries for help and Iago immediately stabs him to death.

Bianca then enters the disturbance, and Iago suggests that she is part of the plot. Iago calls for a litter to bear off the dead Roderigo and wounded Cassio. Emilia now enters and wants to know what has just happened. Iago tells her that Cassio was attacked by Roderigo and others who escaped. He comments that this is the consequence of whoring. Next, he asks Emilia to find out where Cassio dined that evening. When Bianca admits that he was with her, Iago says that she will have some explaining to do.

### **Analysis**

The opening of this scene provides the action to which all of Iago's scheming has been a prelude. Iago physically sets Roderigo in a position "behind this bulk" to attack Cassio, and he promises to be nearby. In an aside he comments that he has "rubbed this young quat almost to the senses / And he grows angry" in a tone of contempt for Roderigo who he has manipulated all along. When Iago says "Now whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio kill him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my gain" he demonstrates how little he values human life and how self-serving he is. Cassio enters and Roderigo's attempt to kill him fails, and Cassio in turn wounds Roderigo. Iago's subsequent wounding of Cassio leads Othello to believe that Iago kept his word in his vow to kill Cassio, so he calls him "brave ...honest ...and just." The irony of this statement is that

Othello still doesn't see the evil in Iago. The melee is disturbing enough to bring out Lodovico and Gratiano who comment on the dangerousness of the situation. Iago appears and seems to show concern for Cassio's wound, and when Roderigo appears, Cassio stabs him. The others believe that Iago acts out of revenge for his friend, but Iago's true motive in killing Roderigo is that he served his purpose and would certainly tell all if he lived.

When Bianca comes to see what is going on, Iago implicates her in the plot to kill Cassio. His derogatory attitude is expressed when he says that he suspects "this trash / To be party to the injury." This is another attempt to divert any suspicion away from himself. In a further ruse to appear beyond reproach he conducts an investigation into Cassio's whereabouts and asks where Cassio had dined. Bianca asserts that he dined with her, and Cassio charges her to go with him. The events of this scene occur rapidly to bring the play to its final dramatic scene.

## **Act V, Scene 2**

### **Summary**

Othello enters his bedchamber and sees Desdemona sleeping. As he beholds her beauty, he almost changes his mind about killing her. He kisses her, and when she awakens, he asks her if she has prayed, accuses her of infidelity, and asks her about the handkerchief. She explains she never loved Cassio in the way Othello suggests, and she never gave him her handkerchief. Subsequently, Othello calls her a liar and says he saw Cassio with the handkerchief. Desdemona says that he must have found it, and Othello should ask him, to which Othello responds that Cassio is dead. When Desdemona expresses grief over this, Othello smothers her. Emilia enters with news that Cassio killed Roderigo. When Othello learns that Cassio is not dead, he realizes that something is not right. Desdemona cries out, dies, and Othello admits killing her. When Emilia asks why he killed her, Othello tells her to ask Iago about Desdemona's infidelity. Disbelieving Othello, Emilia cries out, and Montano, Gratiano, and Iago enter the bedchamber. Emilia asks Iago if he ever told Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful. When he admits that as the truth, Emilia calls him a liar and blames him for causing Othello to murder Desdemona. Iago charges her to get home, and she responds that she will obey him no longer. Gratiano says that Brabantio's death was fortunate, for to see Desdemona dead would surely kill him.

Othello says that he was sure of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio and uses the handkerchief as proof. Emilia immediately responds by telling Othello that she gave the handkerchief to Iago who begged her to steal it. Othello runs at Iago, but Montano unarms him. Iago stabs Emilia and runs away. Montano and Gratiano chase after him. Lodovico and Montano enter with Cassio and Iago, and Othello wounds Iago with another sword he had in his chamber, but Othello is soon disarmed. Lodovico says that Iago confessed to his part in the attempt on Cassio's life and implicated Othello. Othello apologizes to Cassio who says he never gave Othello cause. Lodovico reveals that letters were found with Roderigo. Othello asks Cassio how he got the handkerchief, and Cassio says Iago planted it in his room. Lodovico discharges Othello and appoints Cassio in charge in Cyprus. Othello asks for a moment, stabs himself with a concealed weapon, falls across Desdemona, and dies.

### **Analysis**

When Othello beholds "that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster" he almost dismisses his suspicions of her. The image of the whiteness of her skin contrast with previous references to his blackness. His statement "Put out the light and then put out the light" suggests a comparison of the fragility of a candle flame to that of Desdemona's life. He admits that if he blows out a candle he can relight it, but if he kills her he cannot restore her life. This is a lucid moment amid the extremes of anger, jealousy, and rage which he has experienced in a short span of time. After he kisses her and she awakens, he is reminded of all that Iago has planted in his mind, and it is too late for him to reverse his course of action. In her fear, Desdemona asks for an explanation, and Othello says he saw Cassio with the handkerchief which Desdemona says she did not give to Cassio. Now he

feels she is a liar, and with the news that Cassio is dead, Desdemona expresses grief. In a fit of jealous rage, he smothers her with a pillow.

When Emilia enters, a series of dialogue occur which unravels all the twisted elements of Iago's schemes. Othello expects "'Tis like she comes to speak of Cassio's death;" however, she asserts that "Cassio... hath killed a young Venetian / Called Roderigo" which prompts Othello to realize "Then murder's out of tune, / And sweet revenge grows harsh." This is the first sign that everything may not be as it seems.

Desdemona stirs, cries out, and dies. Consequently, Emilia calls Othello "the black devil" suggesting a contrast between the blackness of his deed to the whiteness of the slain Desdemona. Othello gives the reason that he killed her as "Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband." Here the imagery of sex is spoken of in animal terms, and it echoes Iago's first reference about Othello as "an old black ram tuppung your white ewe" to Brabantio in the opening scene of Act I. Emilia, surprised that her husband would know this, calls for help.

When Iago comes in, Emilia confronts him with Othello's charge, and he admits that he did tell Othello. Emilia berates him, and he orders her to go home to which she replies "Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home."

We also learn of Brabantio's death from Gratiano, his brother, who says that "pure grief / shore his old thread in twain" after Desdemona left with Othello.

Obsessed with the handkerchief, Othello says that Desdemona gave it to Cassio as a token of her love. At this, Emilia immediately explains that it was she who gave it to Iago. Realizing for the first time that Iago tricked him, Othello charges at him with a sword, but Montano unarms him. To silence Emilia, Iago stabs her and runs out.

By this time Othello realizes that it is futile to attempt to escape his fate and is totally dishonored. When Lodovico enters after having apprehended Iago, he asks where Othello is, and he refers to himself as "he that was Othello." This perception suggests that he has already experienced a death and no longer exists. When Lodovico asks "Where is that viper," Othello remarks "If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee." For the first time the evil nature of Iago is recognized with references to him as a snake and a devil. After being wounded by Othello, Iago triumphantly replies, "I bleed, sir, but not killed."

Othello admits to his part in the plan to murder Cassio, and when Cassio says he gave Othello no cause, Othello asks his pardon. Othello realizes that he has been duped by Iago and wants to know why "that demi-devil / ...hath thus ensnared my soul and body." However he gets no explanation from Iago whose final comment is "From this time forth I never will speak word."

Lodovico discloses that letters found with Roderigo explain his attempt to kill Cassio, his discontent with Iago, and his upbraiding of Iago for making him provoke Cassio to a quarrel. Still unanswered for Othello is how Cassio came to possess the handkerchief. Cassio explains how he found it in his room and how Iago admitted putting it there "for a special purpose which wrought to his desire."

After all schemes are explained, Lodovico strips Othello of his command and appoints Cassio in charge. Othello's fate is to remain a closely guarded prisoner "Till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state."

Othello's final speech starkly contrasts his initial speech to the council. Othello who was once proud of his accomplishments yet humble in his presentation is now dishonored and humiliated with his last words. He is a man who has just experienced an agonizing personal defeat in contrast to his many glorious military triumphs. In just a short span of time he has been deceived by a man whom he trusted, sought the murder of his

honorable lieutenant, and killed his faithful wife.

In his last words to everyone, Othello is concerned about how the events will be recorded. At first, he acknowledges that “he has done the state some service,” but that is not his primary concern. He wants the truth about “these unlucky deeds” revealed without alteration. It is no surprise that he emphasizes truth after having been so maliciously deceived. Above all, he wants to be known as “one that loved not wisely, but too well.” At this point Othello recognizes his love as a weakness because his misplaced love for Iago blinded him to Iago’s treachery and to Desdemona’s innocence. Othello faces the humiliation of “being wrought” by Iago’s manipulation and “perplexed in the extreme.” For Othello who has prided himself in his ability to use his mind in military service, manipulation is a devastating blow. In suggesting his own epitaph, Othello regrets having thrown “a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe.” This metaphor compares Desdemona to a valuable precious stone which he threw away out of ignorance of its worth.

Othello shows remorse for his actions and, as one not given to a show of emotion, sheds “tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their med’cinable gum.” However, there is no medicine powerful enough to cure the ill. His final epithet of Iago as the “malignant and turbaned Turk” suggests that although Othello accepts responsibility for his crime, he realizes that he had been seduced by Iago’s corruption. Othello’s final description of himself as “the circumcised dog” suggests the level to which he has been reduced and evokes the animal imagery sustained throughout the play. At this point he draws a concealed weapon and kills himself rather than face dishonor. Lodovico’s direct address to Iago as a “Spartan dog” is an apt label for “this hellish villain” who has succeeded in destroying all the goodness around him with his own malignancy.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Critical Commentary

1. [Preface to the Critical Commentary](#)
2. [Act I Commentary](#)
3. [Act II Commentary](#)
4. [Act III Commentary](#)
5. [Act IV Commentary](#)
6. [Act V Commentary](#)

### Preface to the Critical Commentary

#### Preface to the Critical Commentary:

Shakespeare's plays as we read them today are not as they appeared in his lifetime. Some plays were printed in quarto version before being printed in the First Folio of 1623. A quarto was produced by folding a sheet of printing paper into four sections. Our modern paperbacks approximate a quarto. A folio was produced from folding a sheet of printing paper in two. Today's large 'coffee table' books are a rough equivalent to a folio. Once the paper size was decided, the type for the printing press was set up by hand by men known as compositors. Working from a hand-written, or scribal, document, the compositors would often misread a word or change words so that the print made sense. Since spelling and punctuation rules had not yet been established, there was no consistency in these two areas. These and a variety of other production problems meant that in order for a modern reader to understand the text of Shakespeare's plays, an editor will attempt to

put the language of the plays into a more literate format.

When an editor tackles a play like Othello, he is dealing with a play that exists in both quarto and Folio versions. By comparing the two versions (texts), an editor chooses what he considers to be the best reading. The edition which results from this process is known as a 'conflated' text. Many copies of Shakespeare's plays that we use today are conflated texts. This analysis has used: The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice, E. A. J. Honigmann, ed. Walton-on-Thames, England: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. (The Arden 3 Series), 1997.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Act I Commentary

**Scene i:** Like other Shakespeare plays, Othello opens with a scene that sets the tone for the rest of the play. The playwright is intentionally vague in the details of the conversation between two men with one exception: line 2 reveals that one of the men is called Iago. We arrive in media res, literally in the middle of things.

The first man is complaining that Iago has spent his money freely and is very upset that Iago knows about 'this' (1.1.3). As the conversation continues, we learn that Iago hates 'him' (1.1.6) because 'he' has passed over Iago for promotion to lieutenant, choosing instead 'Michael Cassio, a Florentine' (1.1.19) and 'a great arithmetician' (1.1.18). Who is this 'he' and why does Iago hate him so much? After a lengthy list of complaints, Iago throws us a slight hint: 'And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient' (1.1.32). Iago's sarcasm is distilled into a single epithet, 'Moorship'. Not only is the man under verbal attack Iago's superior, he is a Moor, an outsider to the world of Venice.

Speaking logically, the other man tells Iago that if he were in Iago's place, he would quit. Defensively, Iago explains that he only serves him to get even eventually. Iago assures his companion, Roderigo, that

... I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at; I am not what I am (1.1.63–64).

As with his other plays, Shakespeare puts the whole play before us in a few lines. Iago is not what he is. As we will see, neither is anyone else. The key to this play is the effect of real and/or imagined deception: things are not what they are.

Roderigo, at Iago's urging, yells up to Brabantio's window, rousing the house from their sleep. Iago wastes no time in putting his plot for revenge against this Moor into action. He informs Brabantio:

Zounds, sir, you're robbed; for shame, put on your gown!  
Your heart is burst, you have lost your soul,  
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe! (1.1.85–88).

Here Iago not only informs Brabantio of a matter that is of obvious importance, but he also reveals a lot about himself and the people with whom he deals.

Iago begins a speech pattern he will continue throughout the play, especially when he is speaking about women. He uses animal imagery to categorise the hated Moor. He continues its use to describe the sex act as an act of bestiality and to demean the woman involved. Iago also apparently knows Brabantio's weak spot. His abuse of the woman contrasts starkly to 'heart' and 'soul' used to describe Brabantio's loss, thus revealing that



the woman sleeping with the Moor is very close to Brabantio. The sexual value of this woman is a core issue for the old man.

When Roderigo addresses Brabantio, we learn that Roderigo has been banned from Brabantio's house as an unsuitable marriage candidate. Roderigo, however, tries to calm Brabantio. Iago finally interrupts with the news that 'your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs' (1.1.114–116). Once again, Iago is crude and unyielding, incensing Brabantio who begins to search the house for his daughter. Abruptly, Iago tells Roderigo that he must leave since he cannot bring such an open accusation against the Moor.

At first we may find this scene amusing, that Iago, having made the accusation cannot make the accusation. On consideration, we discover what a great psychologist Iago actually is. He has put forth a truth: the Moor is sleeping with Brabantio's daughter. He has, however, omitted the details and context of the truth, thereby altering its reception and perception. It is not what it is. Iago will do this 'truth-bending' throughout the play until we ourselves question what the truth is.

As Iago leaves, an irate Brabantio confronts Roderigo with the fact that his daughter is indeed missing. He wonders if she is married; if so, perhaps she was charmed into it by magic. Brabantio thanks Roderigo and leads his household into Venice's dark streets.

**Scene ii:** In this scene, we meet the Moor who has apparently kidnapped Brabantio's daughter. His first line is a telling one. When Iago tells Othello that he had wanted to kill a man (possibly Roderigo or Brabantio), Othello responds: 'Tis better as it is' (1.2.6). In 186 lines, Shakespeare has subtly given us the entire play:

I am not what I am.  
'Tis better as it is.

We will discover that if Othello had left things as they were, he would not have met tragedy. But for now, Iago informs Othello that he faces an annulment or jail for marrying 'the gentle Desdemona' (1.2.25). Othello responds that he is not afraid of whatever Brabantio may do because of the service he has done for Venice. He tells Iago that his reputation as a general is such that only for his love of Desdemona would he even consider compromising it.

Othello's lieutenant arrives with officers from the Duke of Venice and the Senate. Othello is summoned to the Senate on an urgent matter concerning Cyprus. Othello prepares to leave and while he does, Iago tells the lieutenant that Othello is married. As the men leave, Brabantio, Roderigo, and others draw their weapons to attack Othello. Brabantio is furious and demands to know the whereabouts of Desdemona. He accuses Othello of casting a spell on the girl. He contends that Desdemona was

So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation (1.2.67–68).

Brabantio goes even further to accuse Othello of using drugs and witchcraft. Brabantio orders the officers with him to arrest Othello and kill him if he resists. Calmly Othello asks the irate father where he would like Othello to go. Brabantio says 'To prison' and Othello counters that he is summoned by the Duke. Brabantio does not believe that the Duke has called for a council meeting in the middle of the night, but decides that his cause has such overwhelming importance that it should be presented directly to the Duke.

On the surface this scene may be viewed as giving us details about and introductions to characters we will meet later. However, the scene also gives us immediate access to the dynamics of the various relationships which shape the play. We meet Othello's lieutenant who Iago had so maligned in Scene One. From his dialogue, we can see that he is a straight-to-the-point military man. We are unaware that he has any

connection to Desdemona at this point, but Iago's comment, 'If it prove a lawful prize, he's made for ever' (1.2.51), serves two purposes. Iago knows something that the lieutenant does not but should know. And Iago, while saying Othello will be 'made for ever' is planning the general's downfall as well as that of the lieutenant. Therefore, we see Iago as consistently sarcastic and manipulative without being shown why he is that way.

The scene also gives us a strong first impression of Othello. He is a general who is a career soldier. His handling of Brabantio shows his prowess at dealing with men either in the heat of battle or the heat of passion, which could almost be synonymous. He is so confident in his capabilities that he seems to ride above Brabantio's racial epithets and wrath.

Without our realising it, Shakespeare has constructed several triangles which will frame the action of the play: Iago, Roderigo, Othello; Iago, Cassio, Othello; Brabantio, Othello, Desdemona; Cassio, Othello, Desdemona. Each of these triangle are interlinked and have as their common thread the inclusion of Othello. The difference in how the problems of these relationships are resolved will be based on how Othello acts or does not act on Iago's 'I am not what I am'.

**Scene iii:** This scene opens with the Duke's and the senators' comments on the inconsistencies in the reports of the number of galleys (ships) in the Turkish fleet. This discussion creates a geographical triangle: Venice, Turkey, Cyprus. The Duke arrives at the conclusion that whether the Turkish fleet has 170, 140, or 200 galleys, it is certain that they pose a threat to Cyprus and, as is soon reported, to Rhodes. The messenger comes from the governor of Cyprus who begs the Duke to send help. The Duke wants to send Othello, who enters the senate chamber with Roderigo and Brabantio.

The Cyprus situation is the last thing on Brabantio's mind. When the man wails, 'My daughter, O, my daughter' (1.3.60) in response to the Duke's 'what's the matter' (1.3.59), the Duke thinks Desdemona has died. Obviously, the two men have different criteria for defining 'grief' (1.3.56). Brabantio repeats his accusation that Desdemona has been bewitched and points the finger at Othello. Othello's response to the Duke and the others shows him to be a true tactician.

Othello admits witchcraft and asks for the Duke to bring Desdemona to the Senate, which he does, with Iago showing them the way. During this time, Othello tells a moving story of how Desdemona listened to his stories of 'the battles, sieges, fortunes/That I have passed' (1.3.131–132). The general relates that frequently Desdemona was moved to tears by his tales. When Desdemona indicated she was in love with Othello 'for the dangers I had passed' (1.3.168), he admitted that he 'loved her that she did pity them' (1.3.169). The Duke believes Othello because the story he has just heard moved him. When Desdemona arrives, she tells Brabantio that she is indebted to him 'for life and education' (1.3.182) but that she now must be loyal to her husband. Brabantio concedes and the Duke urges him to be reconciled to his daughter's marriage. But Brabantio knows that the Senate has convened to discuss action against the Turks, and that his personal problem is subordinate to the needs of the State.

Shakespeare cues us to the shift from private problems to public ones through the language. Othello tells his story in blank verse. Brabantio's capitulation is in rhyming couplets. The Duke follows with a speech in prose. The jarring change is also reflected in the content of the Duke's speech: Othello must leave the comfort of Venice as we have left the comfort of rhyming couplets which is often the way nursery rhymes are constructed. Othello must return to his life as general in command of a 'stubborn and boisterous expedition' (1.3.229).

Othello is unfazed by this assignment. He is accustomed to the hardships imposed on a soldier by war. He knows, however, that Desdemona is not so accustomed, and he asks the Duke to make sure she is cared for. The Duke suggest she stay at her father's. Brabantio immediately refuses and Othello agrees. Desdemona joins the discussion by agreeing with the two men, asking the Duke to allow her to accompany Othello. Othello

assures the Duke that if he agrees to let Desdemona go on the long trip, it will not be to satisfy his needs as a man now would he ignore his duties as a soldier. The Duke responds that it does not matter to him, but the Turks invasion of Cyprus does. Othello must leave immediately whatever he decides about Desdemona.

Othello leaves Iago to secure the commission from the Duke and to make arrangements for Desdemona. As the Duke leaves, Othello assures Brabantio that he (Othello) is a man of strong moral fibre. Brabantio, however, leaves him with a bitter truth:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father, and may thee (1.3.293–294).

Othello shrugs off the comment, and tells Iago that Iago's wife would be a good companion for Desdemona. Iago is to bring both women to Cyprus. Othello and Desdemona leave to spend a last hour together before the trip separates them.

Roderigo is despondent over the turn of events and threatens to drown himself. Iago knows that if he does, then Iago loses extra income. In the passages that follow, the word 'purse' is used six times in fourteen lines, and 'money' seven times in sixteen lines. Iago succeeds in gulling the man who will sell his land and travel to Cyprus in pursuit of Desdemona. Iago then lets us in on his plan. He knows Othello judges men by appearances and he will use this weakness to manipulate the general into believing that Desdemona and Cassio, the lieutenant, are lovers. This way, he can get revenge on Othello and destroy Cassio. It does not seem that Roderigo figures very prominently in this plan.

We now know all we need to understand the play. We have met the main characters, we have the background of life in Venice, and we are about to move to Cyprus. With Iago's plan now verbalised and Othello's commission for war against the Turks, the play promises plenty of action. But Shakespeare is never so obvious, so simple. The scenes so far have given us just a peek at the psychology of these men and women of Venice. How will things change when they are at war in Cyprus?

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Act II Commentary

**Scene i:** Act Two opens with Signior Montano and his friends discussing the weather and its effect on the sea that surrounds Cyprus. The Turks are attempting an invasion, but with most of their fleet wrecked by a storm, their attack is aborted. the storm, however, has not affected the Venetian ship on which Cassio sailed. He arrives safely in Cyprus, and is nervous about Othello's safe arrival. Iago arrives soon after with Desdemona and his wife. Othello has yet to land.

While the company wait for the general, Desdemona engages Cassio, Iago and his wife in a word game that reveals Iago's disdain of women so intensely that Desdemona comments 'O heavy ignorance, thou praisest the worst best' (2.1.143–144). Cassio takes Desdemona's hand, and Iago decides that it will be by such simple actions that he will trap Cassio.

Othello's ship pulls into, and Desdemona greets her husband with a kiss, a very private action in a public forum. Othello announces that the Turks are drowned, and that the war is over. When Othello and Desdemona, leave, Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, but it takes a while to convince him. Ultimately, Iago brings Roderigo around to believing the lie, and they agree to meet later.

This scene poses several perplexing questions. Othello's commission is to fight the Turks and protect Cyprus, but the war is over when he arrives. So, what is this play about? Iago tells Roderigo a deliberate lie. What is he up to? Why does Roderigo believe him? Why does Roderigo stay in Cyprus? Othello and Desdemona are happy newlyweds. How will Iago get his revenge with their love so obviously, and publicly, strong?

The key to these questions can be found in Iago's soliloquy at the end of the scene. He plans to

put the Moor  
At least into a jealousy so strong  
That judgement cannot cure (2.1.297–300).

Iago is a supreme judge of human nature. By seizing on Othello's and Cassio's weaknesses, and by colouring Othello's interpretation of what he sees, Iago will be able to manipulate these people any way he wants.

**Scene ii:** Othello's Herald reads his proclamation for celebrating the defeat of the Turks and his wedding for six hours from 5 – 11 PM. This scene provides the transition from Iago's plan to Iago's action.

**Scene iii:** Othello begins the scene by instructing Cassio to make sure that the celebration does not get out of hand. Cassio replies that Iago is overseeing the feast, but, nonetheless, he will follow the general's order. Othello and Desdemona retire to bed.

When Cassio tells Iago that they must attend to the watch, Iago tells him that it is not yet 10 and the celebration has a bit more to go. Cassio protests that he has no capacity for drinking, but Iago insists. Cassio is soon intoxicated. Iago then tells Montano that Cassio is a habitual drunker, and Montano resolves to inform Othello of this fact. When Iago sends Roderigo after Cassio, Cassio chases Roderigo and gets into a fight with Montano. Roderigo sounds the alarm when Montano is wounded. Othello comes in from his bedroom to break up the brawl. He asks 'honest Iago' (2.3.173) to tell him what is going on. Othello presses for information until Iago is 'forced' to confess that Cassio started the brawl. Othello relieves Cassio of being his officer. Cassio is devastated by the loss of his reputation.

Iago assures Cassio that nothing is lost, that all Cassio needs to do is to go back to Othello when the time is right. Cassio curses drinking and says that if he did go to Othello to get his place back, Othello would label him a drunkard. Iago then tells him that he should go to Desdemona instead and her intercede for him with Othello. Cassio agrees and thanks Iago for his 'honest' advice.

Iago tells us how his plan will play out when Roderigo comes in, complaining that he is broke, beaten, and on his way home. Iago tells him he must have patience. Othello has already fired Cassio, and soon Othello will get rid of Desdemona.

This scene not only sets Iago's plan into motion, but also achieves one of his goals, the demotion of Cassio. If this goal is achieved, what else could be left for him to do?

What is particularly interesting is the depiction of small personal events against the backdrop of global political events. The war with the Turks is over before it begins as Iago's plan opportunistically is completed before he initiates it. One other notable point is that Othello is now in an arena in which he has a place: he is the general. In Venice he was a subordinate outsider. Here he is the leader. Desdemona, on the other hand, was a daughter in Venice, and is now a wife — both roles subservient to strong, older men. Curiously, Othello demands Christian behaviour from his troops in non-Christian Cyprus.

Clearly, Iago realises that, while in Venice, he has little opportunity to effect his plan because of the proximity of people who can contradict him on Desdemona's reputation, in spite of her father's advice to Othello.

However, in this environment, as Othello's ancient, Iago's position is more heavily weighted.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

### Act III Commentary

**Scene i:** To relieve some of the tension already established and perhaps to distract us a little Shakespeare brings in musicians and a clown to begin this scene. The more practical purpose is to get the Clown to relay a message from Cassio to Emilia, Iago's wife. As Cassio waits for Desdemona, Iago himself comes by to check on the humiliated lieutenant. Cassio is touched to the point where he exclaims: 'I never knew/ A Florentine more kind and honest' (3.1.40–41). Emilia comes to tell Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are discussing the situation and that Desdemona is on Cassio's side. Cassio asks Emilia to arrange a private meeting between Cassio and Desdemona. She agrees.

Once again the word 'honest' is used to describe Iago, but Cassio does so in the context of identifying Iago as a fellow as good as any Florentine. Italian city-states were fiercely separatist and patriotic. For Cassio, a Florentine, to praise an outsider like Iago as 'kind and honest' as a Florentine is a high compliment indeed, and, as such, underlines the dramatic irony of the statement. Iago is obviously far from kind, definitely not honest, nor eager to be classified as a Florentine. Furthermore, Iago draws his innocent wife into his web of intrigue.

**Scene ii:** This six-line scene between Othello, Iago, and some gentlemen allows us to see Othello dispatching his duties as a general. It is also apparent that Iago has replaced Cassio. In addition, we learn that Othello will be on official public business which becomes important in the following scenes.

**Scene iii:** Desdemona assures Cassio that she will do her best to get him reinstated with Othello. Emilia adds that her husband is worried too. Desdemona pledges before Emilia that she will persist in Cassio's cause. Cassio leaves hurriedly when Othello and Iago approach.

Iago comments to Othello that he does not like the young man's leaving at the sight of Othello. Desdemona begins her suit on behalf of Cassio. Having completed some official business and having more to do, Othello tells Desdemona that now is not the time to discuss Cassio. Desdemona, however, continues, unwilling to stop talking even when Othello concedes. Finally Desdemona leaves.

Iago questions Othello about Cassio's role as a go-between between Othello and Desdemona when they were courting. Othello is furious at Iago's insinuation that Cassio courted Desdemona for himself. Yet he is unsure. Othello presses Iago to tell him what he is thinking. Iago finally plants the seed: 'O beware, my lord, of jealousy! (3.3.167). Othello begins to fight the identity of the emotion he has been feeling. Iago seizes the opportunity to remain free of suspicion. When Othello demands proof of Desdemona's deception, Iago tells Othello to use his eyes. He reminds the general that Desdemona deceived Brabantio to marry him, an echo of what Desdemona's father had told him in the Senate chamber.

Although Othello says, 'I do not think but Desdemona's honest' (3.3.229), it is obvious that he has serious doubts by saying that the girl had rejected all other suitors of her own social standing and race to marry Othello — an act way out of character for her.

Iago has struck at the heart of Othello's insecurities, but he has done so in Othello's native environment, a war zone. Desdemona's interference in this area is not only unwise, but presents a challenge to her husband's decisions regarding his army. It is very ironic that Othello would be most vulnerable where he is most secure.

Iago knows this full well and presses onward.

Iago advises Othello to hold off on Cassio's reinstatement and observe Cassio and Desdemona together, not giving what Iago has just said a second thought. After Iago laves, Othello verbalises his inadequacies in assessing human behaviour and in knowing about love. Othello suddenly and firmly arrives at the conclusion that he has been wronged by Desdemona and that he can only hate her now. Just as quickly he says:

Look where she comes.  
If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself,  
I'll not believe it. (3.3.281–283).

Critically, Desdemona and Emilia come to call Othello to the state banquet he has arranged. Othello tells his wife he has a headache and she tries to soothe it with her handkerchief. Almost imperceptibly, she drops it, and she and Othello go to the banquet. Emilia picks up the handkerchief, and, because Iago had pressured her for it, Emilia decides to give it to him instead of Desdemona. Iago determines to plant the handkerchief on Cassio, observing that it is the little things that aggravate jealousy.

Othello has left the banquet, tortured by his thoughts, alleging that as long as he did not know of Desdemona's falsity, he was better off. Iago sympathises with him, Othello again demands proof of Desdemona's sin. Iago is evasive again, but asks if catching Desdemona in bed with Cassio would be proof. Othello angrily responds that that would be impossible, but Iago says 'imputation and strong circumstances' (3.3.409) should be enough. Othello demands 'a living reason' (3.3.412). Iago insists on telling his lies. He says that while he slept with Cassio (as soldiers shared sleeping arrangements), Cassio thought Iago was Desdemona, but then says it must have been a dream. Othello is enraged.

Having worked Othello to a fever pitch, Iago tells him that Cassio has Desdemona's handkerchief. As Othello continues to curse and rage against Desdemona, Iago takes a vow of service to Othello who orders him to kill Cassio 'within these three days' (3.3.475). He then promotes Iago to lieutenant.

It would seem that Iago has achieved all he set out to do. Yet this is only the middle of the play. The forces Iago has unleashed are beyond his control and we are uncertain at the end of this very long scene where the play is going. This uncertainty is akin to that felt by Othello. He does not want to believe that his wife is an adulteress, but his experience with women is small when compared to his experience with men on whom he relies and with whom he has shared the majority of his life.

In addition, Othello's tendency to make judgements by appearances, an essential skill for a soldier, will prove to be his downfall in the area of marital relations. It is a dangerous game that Iago is playing and his instinct for self-preservation demands the sacrifice of many innocent lives.

**Scene iv:** Desdemona and Emilia have been looking for the handkerchief, and Emilia has lied about its whereabouts. Desdemona, unaware of what has transpired between Othello and Iago, comments that Othello is incapable of jealousy. Simultaneously, it is a silly and tragic statement that reveals Desdemona's lack of perception and understanding of her husband.

When she sees him, Desdemona immediately tells Othello that she has sent for Cassio so that Othello may speak with him about reinstatement. Suddenly, Othello says he feels a chill and asks Desdemona for her handkerchief. When she offers it, he asks for the one that he had given her, the one that had belonged to his mother, the one Emilia has given to Iago. He tells Desdemona that the cloth is magic. They begin to squabble about where it could be, and Desdemona tells Othello that his demand for the handkerchief is a trick to distract her from pleading for Cassio. Othello leaves in a fury.

Iago has convinced Cassio that only Desdemona can plead his cause, and when Cassio asks her how things are going, Desdemona responds that Othello is not himself and that she has done her best. Iago cannot believe that Othello is angry and goes off to investigate, ostensibly. Desdemona tried to analyse why Othello should be so irritated, and ascribes it to matters of state. Emilia hopes that this is indeed the reason and jealousy. Desdemona and Emilia leave Cassio to find Othello, and Bianca approaches the dishonoured officer.

Bianca, a local prostitute, asks Cassio where he has been. He tells her he has serious problems to consider, and then asks her if she would remove some embroidery from a handkerchief he had found in his chamber. He tells Bianca he is waiting for Othello, but he will walk with her a little, promising to see her soon.

With this scene's beginning with a word play game between Desdemona and the Clown, it would be easy to dismiss it as a light scene that only tells us about the handkerchief, which is such a little thing. But there is a clever structure here. In a comedy the accidental passing of a small item such as a handkerchief would be a running joke and probably would be very funny. However, at this point in the play, negative passions are abundant. The handkerchief is critical to Desdemona's 'defence'. By starting the scene with a comic convention and twisting it to fit tragic circumstances, Shakespeare emphasises the intensity of Othello's jealousy and its tragic results. There is nothing funny about this little item, not even the facts that it was given to Othello by his mother and that it has magic powers. These ascriptions underline the effects that irrational jealousy has on Othello's psyche, and quite possibly, on us too.

Emilia's lack of honesty to Desdemona is minor in comparison to Iago's lies to Othello, but it is no less deadly. Both women seriously misjudge their mates and their moods. Such misjudgements counter the males' distorted views of women. Neither is correct, but both are absolute and ingrained on either side of the male–female equation.

» [Back to Section Index](#)  
» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Act IV Commentary

**Scene i:** This scene illustrates how strong a hold irrational jealousy has on Othello. Iago pushes Othello so far that the general 'falls in a trance' (4.1.43, stage direction) or epileptic fit. Cassio comes in at this point, but Iago send him away. When Othello recovers, Iago tells him that Cassio came by, and that, while Othello observes, Iago will question the young man.

Iago then engages Cassio in conversation about Bianca, while Othello watches, thinking Desdemona is the topic. When Bianca arrives with the handkerchief, Othello realises it must be the one he gave Desdemona. Cassio goes after Bianca and Iago goes after Othello. Othello means to kill both Desdemona and Cassio.

Desdemona arrives with Lodovico who has a letter from Venice. As Desdemona tells Lodovico of the rift between Cassio and Othello, Othello strikes her. Lodovico cannot believe that such behaviour has happened publicly right before his eyes. Othello further humiliates Desdemona and leaves in a rage. Left alone with Iago, Lodovico is told that Othello is not in his right mind. Lodovico takes 'honest' Iago's word for the truth, commenting 'I am sorry that I am deceived in him' (4.1.282)

The entire scene clearly illustrates Othello's inexperience with women. he too quickly ascribes the qualities of a loose woman to an innocent woman. Rather than confront Desdemona with Iago's accusations, Othello chooses to believe his 'friend'. This may seem strange to us, but when we consider that the army has been Othello's life, it becomes easier to understand. On the battlefield, Othello is only as good as the troops under his command. Within a military structure, discipline is handled by a strict, universally observed, code, which

may include striking a soldier. Because of the ever-present threat of death, soldiers learn quickly to be co-dependent on each other. Therefore, Othello has no valid reason to doubt a man with whom he would entrust his life, however obvious Iago's lies may seem to us.

**Scene ii:** Othello opens the scene by questioning Emilia about her observation of Cassio and Desdemona. It may seem a small glimmer of hope, but when Emilia leaves to fetch Desdemona, Othello completely discounts Emilia's story. His mind is made up.

He calls Desdemona 'whore', 'public commoner', and 'impudent strumpet', terms that would never have crossed his mind had they stayed in Venice, and words which were tantamount to curses for Elizabethan audiences. No matter what Desdemona says or does, she cannot prove her innocence to her husband. She also cannot understand why Othello is behaving this way.

When Emilia returns, she interrupts Othello's stream of verbal abuse. Of course, Emilia's first concern is for the dazed Desdemona:

Do not talk to me, Emilia; I cannot weep, nor answers have I none  
But what should go by water. (4.2.104–106)

Desdemona sends Emilia to get Iago, and when he enters, he asks Desdemona what is wrong. Emilia answers for her mistress who cannot even bring herself to repeat the word 'whore'. Emilia knows that

some eternal villain,  
Some busy and insinuating rogue,  
Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office' (4.2.132–134)

has spread this tale(s) about Desdemona.

Iago hears his wife speak the truth and instantly denies that such a man exists. But Emilia persists. Finally, Iago calls her a fool. The distraught Desdemona asks her betrayer for advice on how to win Othello back. Iago assures her that Othello is simply under pressure from state business and Desdemona and Emilia go in to supper as Roderigo arrives.

Roderigo is very annoyed with Iago because Iago has failed to deliver Desdemona to him. Iago turns Roderigo's wrath to purposeful anger by asking him to kill Cassio so that Othello and Desdemona cannot return to Venice. Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio is having supper with a prostitute. Iago will also help Roderigo kill Cassio.

This scene is loaded with dramatic irony. Othello who did not ask for it received advice from Iago that leads him to believe Desdemona is a shameful adulteress. Desdemona who asks for Iago's advice is told nothing is wrong with her husband and that all will be well. In the meantime, Iago, the villain, further deceives the innocent Roderigo who seems intent on his own destruction. Single-handedly, Iago has taken him beyond bankruptcy to murder. There seems to be no limit to Iago's evil ventures. But just as Emilia interrupts Othello's tirade, she will interrupt her husband's plan. She has unwittingly spoken the truth, but next time, she will be acutely aware of the truth. For Iago, the limits are soon to be reached.

**Scene iii:** This scene is often cut in performance but its inclusion is essential to the unrelenting tension building to the climax of Act Five.

Othello, Lodovico, Desdemona, and Emilia leave the state banquet, and Othello orders Desdemona to go to bed alone. But before Emilia leaves, she and Desdemona have a revealing conversation about the relationship



between men and women.

Desdemona speaks of dying for love as Emilia prepares her for bed. Desdemona has noted that Lodovico is 'a proper man. A very handsome man' (4.3.34–35), indicating two things: (1) that she can note these qualities in a man other than her husband; (2) that she had recognised those qualities in Othello. This second point clearly demonstrates her internal confusion about the sudden change in his behaviour toward her. Desdemona begins to sing a sad song that ends 'If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men' (4.3.56). In his moments of darkest despair, Othello will repeat this same sentiment almost verbatim.

But for now, Desdemona asks her maid if there are women who will cheat on their husbands. Emilia says that there are, and that if she were offered 'the whole wide world' (4.3.367), she would too. Desdemona refuses to believe her. Emilia tells her that if wives stray, it is the fault of their husbands, because men sleep with other women when they are abroad, they get jealous over petty things, they restrict their wives' liberty, beat them or reduce them to less than when they were when they married. According to Emilia, husbands should treat wives as equals and recognise that women's feelings are just as intense as men's.

The placement of this scene before Act Five shows us just how well Emilia knows Iago and what her life with him has meant. Thus, the playwright underlines Desdemona's lack of knowledge about sexual politics. Not only is Desdemona naive, but she also refuses to heed Emilia's worldly advice.

It must be remembered that Desdemona was raised in the world of courtly love. Putting the wedding sheets on the bed, asking Emilia to wrap her body in them should she die, and singing 'The Willow Song', are all conventions of how a lover should behave, a philosophy to which Emilia does not subscribe. The contrast between the two women is the contrast between illusion and reality, being in love with love and being in love, young idealism and old practicality, inexperience and experience.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Act V Commentary

**Scene i:** The last two scenes of the play bring all the plot elements together in the final spiral of destruction of most of the people we have had under observation for four acts. Iago has convinced a reluctant, and we might think hopeless, Roderigo to kill an unsuspecting Cassio with his help. To Iago, however, Roderigo is the one who must be killed in addition to Cassio, because Iago has robbed Roderigo of a fortune that Iago cannot possibly repay. Furthermore, if Cassio lives, Iago risks being exposed to Othello for the conniving villain he is.

Roderigo attacks Cassio, but misses. Cassio stabs Roderigo, and Iago follows suit, wounding Cassio in the leg. When Othello hears Cassio cry 'Murder! Murder!' (5.1.27), he is convinced that Iago has slain Cassio as promised. Othello goes off to kill Desdemona.

Lodovico and another Venetian, hearing the commotion, think it is a trap; however, Iago comes upon the scene like an innocent, concerned by-stander. Iago fatally stabs Roderigo, binds up Cassio's leg wound, and pretends to be overly concerned in front of the two Venetians. He then tries to implicate the innocent Bianca in the proceedings.

Iago is now in a most precarious situation unless Cassio also dies. But as a prologue to the final scene, Shakespeare sets up the audience well. According to Lodovico, 'it is a heavy night' (5.1.41), meaning that it is foggy and dark, but it is also a heavy night because of the number of deaths and the violence that is yet to

come. Throughout the play, Shakespeare has been playing with the motif of light and darkness: Othello is black, Desdemona white; Iago wakes Brabantio at night and furthers his plan by day; Othello will soon debate Desdemona's death in terms of light and dark.

In addition, Iago is acting more impulsively without a thought for the consequences. Although his primary concern was the murder of Cassio, he slays Roderigo and does not have the opportunity to follow through on his pledge to Othello. Weighed one against the other, the murder of Roderigo is of less consequence to Iago than that of Cassio. Iago's schemes are beginning to disintegrate.

**Scene ii:** As Othello comes in to his and Desdemona's bedroom, he has reverted to 'civilised' language, unable to mention Desdemona's supposed sin to the 'chaste stars' (5.2.2). He compares Desdemona's life to the light he carries, and realises that once he snuffs out her life, he cannot just bring it back.

Once Desdemona acknowledges him, however, Othello is angry again, accusing her of giving Cassio her handkerchief and of sleeping with him. Her denials fall on deaf ears. Desdemona pleads for her life, but Othello smothers her. Emilia knocks on the door at this crucial moment, and Othello thinks she is there with news of Cassio's death.

Emilia, however, tells Othello that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Desdemona, not yet dead, cries, 'O falsely, falsely murdered' (5.2.115). Emilia discovers her mistress dying, and Desdemona says that she alone is responsible for her death. But Othello confesses it to Emilia.

Emilia further learns that her husband, Iago, has told Othello the story of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia, against Iago's plea for her to be quiet, tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief. Othello tries to attack Iago, but Iago stabs Emilia and runs. With her dying breath, Emilia swears to Othello that Desdemona was a good, chaste, and faithful wife.

Othello cannot escape the pain and horror of his own making. The Venetians return with Iago and the wounded Cassio. Cassio reveals that Roderigo left a letter with the full details of Iago's plot. Othello is shattered. He stabs himself, and dies kissing Desdemona.

Lodovico takes control, remands Iago to custody, and prepares to return to Venice to file his report on the situation.

So it would seem that Shakespeare has neatly worked out the fate of all the characters. But has he? We get no further news about Bianca, nor do we know if Cassio is reinstated into the army. Will Othello and Desdemona be buried together in Cyprus or will they be returned to Venice? Will Othello have a full military funeral like Hamlet's? What is 'the torture' (5.2.367) to which Iago will be subjected? Can any punishment really suit his crimes? Are the really crimes or they the actions of an opportunist, a name that could easily describe any of the Venetians?

Shakespeare has left us the end of the domestic tragedy, the death of two lovers, but he also leaves us with a cautionary parable about politics, race relations and the equivocal definition of 'honesty'.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Quizzes

1. [Act I, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers](#)
2. [Act II, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers](#)
3. [Act III, Scenes 1–4 Questions and Answers](#)
4. [Act IV, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers](#)
5. [Act V, Scenes 1 and 2 Questions and Answers](#)

### Act I, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers

#### Study Questions

1. What reason does Iago give for his hatred of Othello?
2. What information do Roderigo and Iago give to Brabantio regarding Desdemona's whereabouts?
3. How does Iago make himself look favorable in Othello's eyes?
4. What news does Michael Cassio bring when he enters?
5. To what does Brabantio attribute Desdemona's affections for Othello?
6. What is the military issue that the Duke of Venice and his senators discuss?
7. What accusation does Brabantio make against Othello to the duke?
8. What explanation does Othello give as cause for Desdemona's affection for him?
9. To whom does Desdemona pledge her duty?
10. In the final speech of Act I, what does Iago plan to do to further his plot against Othello?

#### Answers

1. Iago tells Roderigo that he hates Othello because "Michael Cassio, a Florentine / ...that never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows," has just been chosen by Othello as his lieutenant. His bitterness is evident when he tells Roderigo that "'tis the curse of service" that promotion is made by personal liking not by seniority.
2. After Roderigo calls out in the night that thieves have robbed Brabantio's household, Iago tells Brabantio, in gross images of animal lust, that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe." When he refers to Othello as the devil, he incites Brabantio further against the Moor. Roderigo then informs Brabantio that Desdemona has been "Transported... / To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor."
3. Iago makes himself look favorable in Othello's eyes by telling him how Brabantio's "scurvy and provoking terms" against Othello made him want to attack Brabantio. He also suggests that Othello watch his marriage because Brabantio might invoke the law against it, thus playing on Othello's trust in him.
4. Michael Cassio tells Othello that the duke requires his service because of some military action, "a business of some kind," in Cyprus.

5. Brabantio attributes Desdemona's affection for Othello to his having "enchanted her" because this attraction is so opposite her nature and breeding. He emphasizes Othello's exotic nature in order to minimize the plausibility that Desdemona could choose someone who is not amount "the wealthy curled darlings of our nation."
6. The duke and the senators are in the process of determining the validity of reports that say "a hundred and seven," "a hundred forty," and "two hundred" Turkish galleys are approaching Cyprus. A sailor enters with a false report from Signor Angelo that the Turks are making for Rhodes, but a messenger from Signor Montano, governor of Cyprus, reports that the Ottomites have joined the Turkish fleet and are bearing toward Cyprus.
7. When Brabantio arrives at the duke's he says that Desdemona has been "abused...stolen...and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" in order to accuse Othello of entrapping his daughter.
8. Othello explains that he has taken Desdemona away, but not in the way Brabantio accuses him. His "round unvarnished tale" explains how, as a guest in Brabantio's house, he told his adventures of danger and world experiences. At such times, Desdemona would hear his stories "but still the house affairs would draw her thence" and then she would return to hear more. When he filled in the details of his stories, Desdemona "swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange; / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful," and loved him for the dangers he experienced.
9. Desdemona perceives "a divided duty" between her father and her husband, and as her mother had shown allegiance to her husband, so Desdemona professes "Due to the Moor."
10. After Iago has successfully entrapped Roderigo, he convinces Roderigo not to drown himself and fills Roderigo with anticipation that Desdemona may tire of the Moor and turn to him. Iago then sees a way to "plume up" his "will in double knavery" by suggesting to Othello that Michael Cassio is secretly enamored of Desdemona and that they are on a too familiar basis with each other.

» [Back to Section Index](#)  
 » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act II, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. What dramatic function does the conversation between Montano and the two gentlemen serve?
2. Why does Iago carefully observe the way Cassio greets Desdemona?
3. What information does Iago use to spark Roderigo's interest in his plan to discredit Cassio?
4. What "proof" does Iago use to convince Roderigo that Cassio and Desdemona are lovers?
5. Why does Iago instigate Roderigo to provoke Cassio to a fight?
6. Why does Iago urge Cassio to drink to Othello?
7. What happens when Cassio enters chasing Roderigo?
8. How does Iago plan to bait Othello into doubting Desdemona's fidelity?

9. What does Iago tell Cassio to do to restore the reputation he has sullied in Othello's eyes?
10. How does Iago plan to intensify Othello's doubt about Desdemona?

### Answers

1. The conversation between Montano and the two gentlemen serves several functions. It provides a vivid description of the storm as a substitute for staging which would be difficult to accomplish in the Elizabethan theater. It also makes the news of the destruction of the Turkish fleet more credulous. In addition, it provides a reason for Cassio's concern for Othello's safety. Moreover, it points out the irony of Othello's surviving war and the elements only to be destroyed by one whom he trusts most.
2. Iago's careful observation of Cassio's greeting of Desdemona points out how he uses situations to his advantage. He takes this friendly greeting and plans "[w]ith as little a web as this...[to] ensnare as great a fly as Cassio."
3. Iago tells Roderigo that "Desdemona is directly in love with [Cassio]" in order to stir Roderigo's jealousy toward Cassio so that Roderigo will easily comply with a plan to get Cassio out of the way. As a manipulator, Iago uses Roderigo to suit his own purposes with no concern for Roderigo.
4. When Roderigo finds it incredulous that Desdemona and Cassio could be lovers, Iago adds that "they met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together." Iago's lascivious nature motivates him to give their cordial greeting a lecherous overtone.
5. Iago urges Roderigo to provoke Cassio to a fight so that with "the impediment most profitably removed" Roderigo will "have a shorter journey to [his] desires." Iago says that he is helping Roderigo, when in fact he is working against him.
6. Iago tells Cassio to drink "to have a measure to the health of black Othello" because "'tis a night of revels." However, Iago's true motive is to get Cassio drunk so "He'll be as full of quarrels and offense" and get involved "in some action / That may offend the isle." Iago says one thing but means another.
7. Cassio threatens to beat Roderigo, and when Montano intercedes on Roderigo's behalf, Cassio verbally threatens to "knock [him] o'er the mazzard." This suits Iago's plan for Montano to witness Cassio in a compromising position.
8. Iago plans to tell Othello that Desdemona pleads for Cassio because of "her body's lust" and that the strength of her plea indicates the intensity of her lust.
9. Iago tells Cassio to go to Desdemona and "entreat her to splinter" the rift between him and Othello. Iago appears to be motivated to help Cassio, but in actuality, he wants to further his own plan to discredit him to Othello.
10. While Cassio is pleading his case to Desdemona, Iago plans to bring Othello at the very moment "when he may Cassio find / Soliciting his wife. In this way he can nurture the seed that he has already planted in Othello's mind concerning Desdemona's infidelity.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act III, Scenes 1–4 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. What function do the musicians and clown serve?
2. How does Iago's duplicity become evident when he speaks to Cassio?
3. What does Emilia's remark about the rift between Othello and Cassio suggest about their relationship?
4. Identify and explain two examples of irony found in Act III, Scene 3.
5. Explain how Iago manages to arouse Othello's suspicion in the conversation between Cassio and Desdemona.
6. How does Iago use Othello's racial differences against him?
7. How is the dropping of the handkerchief ironic?
8. What literary device is used to ease some of the dramatic tension that has been established?
9. How is the conversation about jealousy between Emilia and Desdemona ironic?
10. Explain the significance of the handkerchief to Othello.

### **Answers**

1. The musicians and the clown serve as comic relief after the dramatic events of Act II. The musicians' serenade depicts an Elizabethan custom of awakening people of rank with music on special occasions. The clown's comment on the musicians' instruments provides bawdy humor for the audience and commentary on the health conditions of sixteenth century Naples.
2. Iago pretends to be acting on Iago's behalf when he tells him he will keep Othello away while Cassio and Desdemona speak. His real motive is to set up the circumstance in which Othello can find Cassio and Desdemona together for Iago to use as additional "ocular proof" of their infidelity.
3. When Emilia says that Iago is as upset by the rift between Cassio and Othello "as if the cause were his" she demonstrates how she too has been fooled by Iago's pretense. Emilia is also unaware that Iago is not what he presents himself to be.
4. Dramatic irony in which characters are not aware of the full impact of their words can be found in Emilia's statement that Iago is as upset as if he were the cause of the rift between Othello and him. She lacks the awareness that Iago did in fact instigate Roderigo to provoke the incident leading to Cassio's dismissal. In addition, Desdemona's statement "that's an honest fellow," points out her lack of awareness that Iago is anything but honest.
5. Through a series of thoughts in half statements, innuendos, and facial gestures, Iago prompts Othello to think that Iago knows more than he is saying. As a result, Othello asks him to reveal his thoughts as vile as they may be. This is exactly what Iago wants in order to win Othello's trust even more.
6. First Iago points out that Othello's exotic nature isolates him from knowing Venetian culture as well as he himself does. He tells Othello that Venetian women are deceptive and uses Desdemona's elopement to support the fact that "she did deceive her father marrying you." He also plays upon Othello's cultural belief in

magic when he reminds Othello that Brabantio thought his daughter was bewitched or she would never have forsaken all for Othello.

7. Irony of situation involves the occurrence of events that are opposite of the expectation of the character, audience, or reader. When Emilia picks up the handkerchief after it falls, Iago snatches it quickly when he comes in. This unforeseen event provides Iago with the object needed to eliminate Othello's uncertainty regarding Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio.

8. The pun, which depends on the multiple meanings of words, is used to create comic relief in the discussion between Desdemona and the clown. The word lie is used by Desdemona to ask where Cassio lodges, but the clown responds as if she were calling Cassio a liar. The comic use of the pun is also ironic because Iago's whole scheme depends on the many lies he tells.

9. Their conversation about jealousy is ironic because it follows Iago's attempts to provoke that emotion in Othello. It is also ironic because neither of them is aware of the depth to which Iago has played upon that emotion with Othello.

10. The handkerchief was given to him by his dying mother who instructed him to give it to his wife. Othello believes that the handkerchief is imbued with special powers to insure a happy marriage. The loss of the handkerchief "were such perdition / As nothing could match." This belief becomes an obsession with Othello when he learns that Cassio has it, and the handkerchief becomes the object of his undoing.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Act IV, Scenes 1–3 Questions and Answers**

### **Study Questions**

1. How does Othello react to Iago's images of infidelity?
2. Why does Iago speak to Cassio about Bianca?
3. Explain how the handkerchief has increased in significance.
4. How has Othello changed up to this point in the play?
5. Explain the difference in the relationship between Desdemona and Othello compared to when they first arrived in Cyprus.
6. Why is Emilia's belief about what is causing Othello's behavior ironic?
7. What clue does Emilia offer about Iago's own jealousy?
8. Why is Roderigo annoyed at Iago?
9. What is the dramatic significance of the "willow" song?
10. To what does Emilia attribute the fact that women betray their husbands?

## Answers

1. When Iago suggests that Desdemona and Cassio “kiss in private” and lie naked together, Othello falls into a trance.
2. Iago carefully contrives to have Othello eavesdrop on a conversation between Cassio and him. When Iago elicits responses from Cassio about Bianca, Othello thinks he is speaking disparagingly about Desdemona. Iago does this to convince Othello more conclusively of their secret love.
3. When Bianca enters, she jealously berates Cassio for having given her “some minx’s token” and instructs him to “give it to your hobbyhorse.” Of course Othello believes the hobbyhorse to be Desdemona and is indeed convinced of the clandestine affair between the two.
4. Before Iago began to instill ideas into Othello’s head, Othello did not suspect Desdemona of any wrongdoing. In fact, jealousy is not part of his inherent nature. Iago has so goaded him that he now talks of killing Desdemona for what he believes is an act of adultery.
5. When they first arrived in Cyprus, each was overjoyed to see the other, and they talked in terms of endearing love. After Iago’s instigation, Othello became so unlike himself that he was easily angered and even struck Desdemona in the presence of Lodovico and others.
6. Emilia affirms Desdemona’s innocence to Othello and tells him to remove any thoughts of her infidelity “if any wretch have put this in your head.” This is ironic because the very cause she suggests for his behavior is the truth. What makes this even more ironic is the fact that the “wretch” she speaks about is her husband.
7. When Emilia suggests that “some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuating rogue” devised a plot, Iago tells her “Fie there is no such man!” She continues, and he tells her to keep quiet. However, she alludes to “some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And make you to suspect me with the Moor.”
8. He is tired of being promised access to Desdemona and never receiving it at Iago’s whims. Iago has solicited jewels from Roderigo promising to give them to Desdemona as gifts. Consequently, Roderigo threatens to ask for the jewels back, give up his pursuit, and confess the scheme.
9. The melancholy nature of the song foreshadows the final scene of the play, and it creates an atmosphere of foreboding.
10. Emilia believes that when men “slack their duties / ...pour our treasures into foreign laps; / ...break out in peevish jealousies” they don’t think that women are capable of resentment and have feelings. Therefore, women are pushed to the point of betrayal by their own husbands’ insensitivities to them.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Act V, Scenes 1 and 2 Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. Explain Iago’s attitude toward Roderigo and Cassio.
2. How does Othello come to think that Iago has kept his vow?



3. What function does the presence of Lodovico and Gratiano serve?
4. Why does Iago stab Roderigo?
5. How does Iago cast aside suspicion of his own part in the plot to kill Cassio?
6. When does Othello show a change of heart towards Desdemona?
7. Why does Othello mention the handkerchief so often?
8. Why does Othello kill Desdemona?
9. How are all the plots and schemes revealed at the end of the play?
10. Why does Othello kill himself?

### **Answers**

1. Iago demonstrates a callous attitude toward Roderigo and Cassio. Up to this point he has used them to achieve his goals, so to him their deaths would be more valuable than their lives. If Roderigo is dead, then Iago would not have to compensate him for the jewels he tricked from him. If Cassio is dead, there is no risk of his being informed about Iago's plan by Othello.
2. When Othello hears Cassio cry out after being wounded by Iago, he believes that Iago has kept his vow to kill Cassio.
3. Lodovico and Gratiano enter the street at the cries for help. Lodovico's comment "Let's think't unsafe / To come into the cry without more help" suggests the danger that exists. Their presence also provides an "audience" for Iago's scenario to cast off all suspicion from himself.
4. Iago stabs Roderigo to ensure that he will not reveal any of Iago's scheming.
5. As soon as Bianca enters the confusion, Iago says, "I do suspect this trash / To be party in this injury." He uses Bianca as a scapegoat to pretend that an investigation will reveal her complicity in the attempt to kill Cassio.
6. When Othello sees Desdemona sleeping, he begins to doubt his suspicions. The "whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as alabaster tempt him to "not shed her blood."
7. The handkerchief was a significant gift from Othello's mother for what it represented and for the charms it supposedly held. It was the "ocular proof" he requested to believe Iago's accusation. Furthermore, his belief that Desdemona gave it away wounded him deeply and became an obsession because he never knew how Cassio really got the handkerchief until Cassio himself revealed the information.
8. Othello kills Desdemona because he is enraged by jealousy; he believes her to be a liar when she denies having given the handkerchief to Cassio; and she expresses grief at the news of Cassio's death.
9. At the end of the play Gratiano reveals that Brabantio has died. Othello learns that Emilia gave the handkerchief to Iago. Iago confesses his part in the plan to kill Cassio. Letters found with Roderigo reveal his part in the plan to eliminate Cassio. Another letter found on Roderigo reveals his discontent with Iago and his scheme to provoke Cassio to argument.

10. Othello kills himself because he recognizes the full weight of his crime. "He that was Othello" is already destroyed because he has lost all honor and respect and is now no better than the 'malignant and turbaned Turk' he once killed in Aleppo. The disgrace of having all revealed would hurt more than his own suicide.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Themes

In the midst of the play's "corruption scene" (Act III, scene iii), Iago says to Othello that "men should be what they seem" (III.iii.127). Here the arch-villain is referring to Cassio, but the irony is plain enough, as Iago has already disclosed to Roderigo in the opening scene of this tragedy "I am not what I am" (I.i.65). At that stage, Iago elaborates on the meaning of this seeming paradox:

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,  
Yet, for necessity of present life,  
I must show out a flag and sign of love,  
Which is indeed but sign.  
(I.i.154–157)

Via Iago's interwoven schemes, the demise of Othello is propelled by the disparity between appearances, on the one hand, and underlying reality, on the other. It is most often through Iago that this gap is highlighted within the play's text. At the very end of Act II in one of several soliloquies in which Iago reveals his villainy to the audience, Othello's "ancient" says:

When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
As I do now: for while this honest fool  
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,  
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,  
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear—  
That she repeals him for her body's lust;  
And by how much she strives to do him good,  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch.  
(II.iii.351–360)

Iago, the agency of human evil, is able to twist the distinction between what something is and what it appears to be, and it is this deception that stands at the bottom of Othello's tragic tale.

Consistent with this theme, much is made in Othello of perception, of looking, of seeing. Again in the corruption scene, Iago directs Othello, "Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio" and then adds again "look to 't" (III.iii.198, 200). Reacting to Iago's intimations about Desdemona, Othello warns that Iago must be sure that he can prove Desdemona to be a whore, commanding his ancient to "Give me ocular proof" (III.iii.360). It is the "ocular proof" of the mislaid handkerchief that seals Desdemona's doom and Othello's own demise. A prime example of Iago's ability to use Othello's visual perceptions against him takes place in the exchange between Iago and Othello at the start of Act IV. Here Iago suggests scenes for Othello to envision, such as finding Desdemona and Cassio in an embrace or in bed together, and then leaves their evident meaning open for Othello to discover, thereby fanning the flames of murderous jealousy.

Iago is not the only character who exhorts Othello to "look" at Desdemona. In Act I after hearing of his daughter's intention to abide by her "betrayal" of him, Brabantio warns Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292–293). Congruent with this motif, the subject of trust, its loss and its misplacement, is clearly a salient theme in Othello. The central plot of this tragedy pivots upon Othello's loss of trust in Desdemona (and to a lesser extent, Cassio), and the irony of his misplaced trust in Iago. It is, in fact, remarkable how fully the Moor gives himself over to the trust of his ancient. After Brabantio's departure from the Duke's court, Othello tells the Duke of Iago "A man he is of honesty and trust. / To his conveyance I assign my wife" (I.iii.284–285). Indeed, even after Emilia accuses her own husband of treachery, Othello is unable to accept her charge: "My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.154).

The theme of honor and reputation intertwines with those of perception and trust. In the play's second act, Iago tells Othello that Brabantio "prated, / And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms / Against your honor" (I.ii.6–8). To this, the proven hero of Venice replies, "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly" (I.ii.31–32). The title character of Othello is supremely concerned with the reputation that he has earned as a man of military adventures and victories for the sake of his adopted homeland. Right before stabbing himself to death, Othello says to Lodovico, Gratiano and Cassio:

I have done the state some service, and they know't—  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall speak of these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice.  
(V.ii.339–342)

To the end, Othello is concerned with how he appears in the eyes of others, with his name, and with the reputation that it bears and the authority that it carries. The theme surfaces in other contexts. In Act II, scene iii, Othello says to the drunk and disorderly Cassio,

What's the matter  
That you unlace your reputation thus  
And spend your rich opinion for the name  
Of a night-brawler?  
(II.iii.193–197)

After his superior leaves and shorn of his guard command, Cassio laments to Iago, "O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!" (II.iii.263–265).

In this exchange, Iago avers: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself a loser" (II. iii.268–271). But when it comes to the corruption of Othello, Iago has a much different opinion about the value of one's good name.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.  
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;  
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;  
But he that filches from me my good name  
Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
And makes me poor indeed.

The question of whether reputation, or how others see us, is meaningless or supremely important need not be answered for us to understand what Shakespeare says conclusively about "honor," "name," or "renown": that it can be used against us by a skillful practitioner of the practical black arts like Iago.

In seeking to rouse Brabantio against Othello, Iago alarms him by saying that "even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.89–90). Modern Shakespeare critics have naturally focused on the racial implications of a black Othello coming into conjugal union with a white Desdemona. Leaving this dimension of their relationship aside, there is also a vast difference in age between Othello and Desdemona; indeed, the Moor is perhaps of the same age as his bride's father, Brabantio. While their love is certainly passionate, Desdemona is above all a pure and chaste heroine; it is these qualities that attract the Moor to her, and they are, in fact, the same attributes that fathers tend to cherish and protect in their daughters. Here we also observe that it is the father of the city, the Duke of Venice, who ultimately decides the dispute between Othello and Brabantio. At first, the Duke sides with Desdemona's biological father; but upon learning that Othello is the object of Brabantio's complaint, he shifts his judicial viewpoint significantly, calling the Moor "our own proper son." In essence, the patriarchal figure of the Duke allows Othello to "adopt" Desdemona. Throughout the play, Othello consistently identifies himself with the state as the basis of his own personal authority and, in this capacity, acts like a father. But Othello is not capable of paternal authority, for his insecurities as a racially-distinct outsider conspire with Iago's plans to generate behavior that is both bestial and childish.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Character Analysis

1. [Brabantio \(Character Analysis\)](#)
2. [Cassio \(Character Analysis\)](#)
3. [Desdemona \(Character Analysis\)](#)
4. [Emilia \(Character Analysis\)](#)
5. [Iago \(Character Analysis\)](#)
6. [Othello \(Character Analysis\)](#)
7. [Roderigo \(Character Analysis\)](#)
8. [Other Characters \(Descriptions\)](#)

### Brabantio (Character Analysis)

Brabantio is Desdemona's father. He is a magnifico, a prominent citizen and landowner in Venice. When the play opens, Brabantio's household is being disrupted by Iago and Roderigo, who are crying out to Brabantio that he has been robbed. Brabantio says, "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My house is not a grange" (I.i.105–06). He believes he is safely within the civilized society of Venice, not on the dangerous and uncivilized fringe of that society. When Iago cries that Brabantio's daughter is at that moment sleeping with the Moor Othello, he appeals to Brabantio's racial prejudices. When Brabantio recognizes Roderigo, he reminds him that he has prohibited Roderigo from pursuing Desdemona as a suitor. Moments later, Brabantio first reveals his racial prejudice when he tells Roderigo, "O would you had had her! / Some one way, some another" (I.i.175–76). He would prefer anyone to Othello as his daughter's husband, even the unsavory Roderigo.

Brabantio cannot believe Desdemona has freely selected Othello. When Roderigo escorts him to the place where Othello is, Brabantio draws his sword and is ready to fight with the Moor. He accuses Othello of having used spells and charms to seduce and steal his daughter. He makes the same claim to the Venetian senate, arguing that Othello has certainly used witchcraft to win his daughter. In Brabantio's eyes, Desdemona is a maiden so modest that it is unthinkable for her "To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (I.iii.98). When Othello explains that Desdemona was initially fascinated by Othello's tales of exotic adventures, eventually falling in love with him, Brabantio misses the irony. He shared that fascination himself, inviting Othello into his home so that Othello might entertain Brabantio and his guests with the tales of his daring exploits. When Brabantio hears Desdemona support Othello's story, he gives up his appeal. He never sanctions the marriage of his daughter to Othello and leaves uttering his total disapproval.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

### **Cassio (Character Analysis)**

Cassio is chosen over Iago to be Othello's lieutenant. According to Iago, Cassio is "a great arithmetician" (I.i.19), one "That never set a squadron in the field" (I.i.22). Cassio knows battle only from books, unlike Iago who has had a good deal of experience in combat. Cassio is apparently a handsome man, and the ladies are attracted to him. But Cassio also has his weaknesses. When Iago tries to get him to have a drink in celebration of the Turks' defeat and Othello's marriage, Cassio says, "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" (II.iii.33). Cassio is the perfect dupe for Iago. Cassio is attractive, and this fact encourages Othello's belief in Iago's suggestion that Desdemona desires Cassio. Cassio's inability to drink also gives Iago another weapon in his plan to abuse both Cassio and Othello.

Cassio represents the class privilege of which Iago is so envious and resentful. It rankles Iago that Cassio seems to have bought into the idea that he is socially superior. When they are drinking together, Cassio tells Iago that "the lieutenant is to be sav'd before the ancient" (II.iii.109). Cassio is perhaps referring to a commonplace for maintaining military order, but the implication is that Cassio is superior by virtue of his title alone. Again, when Othello disgraces Cassio by scolding him in public and stripping him of his rank for neglecting his watch and brawling with Montano, Cassio laments most the loss of his reputation. In his great desire to regain that reputation, he plays right into the hands of Iago, who suggests that Cassio appeal to Desdemona to intervene with Othello for restoring his rank. For Iago, through whose eyes the audience gets its only sense of Cassio's character, Cassio is all reputation and title with no real substance. Iago refers to "One Michael Cassio, a Florentine" (I.i.20) while a gentleman in Cyprus refers to "A Veronesa; Michael Cassio" (II.i.26). Perhaps Cassio has no inner qualities that identify who and what he is, only his titles. Even so, he ends up in charge of the Venetian troops in Cyprus.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

### **Desdemona (Character Analysis)**

Desdemona is the daughter of Brabantio, a man of some reputation in Venice. As such, she is part of the upper class of Venetian society. Apparently, she has many suitors vying for her hand in marriage, but she freely chooses to marry Othello, a decision which greatly upsets Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo. She testifies before the Venetian senate that the story Othello has told about their mutual attraction is true. In that story, Othello recounts how he was invited to Brabantio's home to tell of his journeys to foreign places. Being forced to leave the room on frequent errands for her father and his guests, Desdemona was unable to hear the full

account of Othello's exploits in those foreign places. But she was intrigued, and on another occasion Othello told her his story in full. Othello tells the duke and the senators, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167–68). Despite what her father and Iago might think, Desdemona does seem to love Othello truly; and, despite Othello's jealous suspicions, she is faithful to him until the end.

In one sense, though, Desdemona presents a contradiction, some critics have argued. After Othello accuses her of being unfaithful, she asks Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (IV.iii.63). Emilia responds realistically that she would not be unfaithful for a trifle, but the world is a big place. While Desdemona's question reveals her innocence, her past actions have shown her to be capable of some level of deception: she secretly elopes with a man of whom her father greatly disapproves. She explains to Brabantio that she has only transferred her love and allegiance from father to husband, just as her mother had done. While many audiences do not judge Desdemona too harshly for this, many critics maintain that through these actions, Desdemona demonstrates the capacity to deceive men. It is this perceived capacity that Iago exploits most aggressively. He virtually seals Desdemona's fate when he tells Othello, "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (III.iii.206–08).

As he contemplates killing Desdemona, Othello echoes Iago's words, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.i.6). For Iago and Othello, Desdemona can only be totally pure when she can no longer experience desire, when men no longer need to fear that that desire will betray them—in death.

Desdemona has been described by some critics as a Christlike figure. Like the love Christ extends to humankind, Desdemona's love for Othello is freely given and need not be defended by reasoned explanations. Othello's great failing is that he does not simply accept Desdemona's love but finds reasons to think himself unworthy of her. He gives in to Iago's suggestions that Desdemona could not freely love one who was so different from her in "clime, complexion, and degree" (III.iii.23). After Othello has killed Desdemona, Emilia asks who has done such a deed. Desdemona revives and says, "Nobody; I myself. Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord" (V.ii.124–25), echoing the unselfishness and forgiveness of Christ's dying words on the cross.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Emilia (Character Analysis)**

Emilia is Iago's wife. She travels to Cyprus with her husband and acts as a waiting woman to Desdemona. When Emilia and Iago arrive in Cyprus, we get some sense of the relationship between Emilia and her husband. Cassio greets Emilia with a kiss, and Iago says, "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough" (II.i. 100–02).

Emilia is a strong-willed woman who apparently will not suffer her husband to abuse her. She tries to please Iago by recovering for him the handkerchief dropped by Desdemona, unknowingly contributing to Desdemona's death. But when she understands what Iago has done and why he has so often asked her to steal that handkerchief, she exposes him and will not be silenced even when he commands her to "hold your peace" (V.ii.218). Emilia is the only character whom Iago cannot totally manipulate.

The play offers other evidence of Emilia's strong-willed and independent nature. After Othello has struck Desdemona and humiliated her in public, Emilia explains to Iago what has happened. She says that, undoubtedly, some knave has slandered Desdemona to make Othello jealous, an absurd accusation similar to Iago's own accusation that Emilia has been unfaithful with the Moor (IV.ii.145–47). Emilia later explains to Desdemona that some women do cheat on their husbands and are justified in doing so if their husbands have

cheated on them. She is a woman who believes that men and women experience the same passions and desires. Near the end of the play, Emilia will not be silenced in her efforts to bring Desdemona's killers to justice. She even defies Othello in his efforts to physically intimidate her. She says, "I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives" (V.ii.165–66). In the end, Iago can only silence Emilia by stabbing her to death.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Iago (Character Analysis)

Iago is Othello's ancient, or ensign. He is a soldier with a good deal of experience in battle, having been on the field with Othello at both Rhodes and Cyprus. He is also one of Shakespeare's greatest villains. He is a master manipulator of people and gets the other characters in the play to do just what he wants. He manipulates others through a keen understanding he seems to have of what motivates them. For example, Iago uses the vision Roderigo has of a union with Desdemona to manipulate Roderigo. Cassio is a man driven by the need to maintain outer appearances, and he easily accepts Iago's advice that he recover his rank by going through Desdemona. Iago also uses to his advantage the fact that Desdemona is of a kind and generous nature, one who will gladly accept the opportunity to persuade her husband to make amends with his lieutenant. And, finally, Iago uses Othello's jealous nature and his apparent insecurity to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia is the only one, it seems, that Iago cannot manipulate, perhaps because she knows him so well.

Iago schemes to have Cassio demoted from his post as lieutenant, next suggesting that Cassio ask Desdemona to intercede for him with Othello on his behalf. She does, which contributes to Othello's suspicions. Othello first begins to distrust Desdemona when Iago points out that, as he and Othello approached Desdemona and Cassio, Cassio quickly departed. Iago also reminds Othello that Desdemona, in eloping with Othello, deceived her father, which shows her capacity for deception. Additionally, Iago reminds Othello of the differences between Othello and Desdemona in terms of color, age, and social status. The handkerchief that Othello had given to Desdemona as a love token is also used to indicate her guilt, a situation also engineered by Iago.

Iago provides the audience with a number of clues to the motives for his actions. First, he feels a certain rancor at not being chosen as Othello's lieutenant. He reassures Roderigo of this:

Preferment goes by letter and affection,  
And not by old gradation, where each second  
Stood heir to th' first. Now, sir, be judge yourself  
Whether I in any just term am affin'd  
To love the Moor.  
(I.i.36–40)

He is disgruntled at having been passed over for promotion, and he sees a chance to get back at both Othello, who has slighted him, and Cassio, the mocking symbol of that slight. Second, he suspects that Othello has engaged in adultery with his wife, Emilia. He mentions this on two occasions: "I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (I.iii.386–88), and

I do suspect the lusty Moor  
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof  
Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw my inwards;  
And nothing can or shall content my soul  
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife.



(II.i.295–99)

Apparently, Iago is so distressed by the thought of Emilia sleeping with Othello that he has accused Emilia of the act. As is typical of her, Emilia characterizes the accusation as absurd (IV.ii.145–47). In their unfounded jealousy, Iago and Othello are very much alike.

Iago and Othello are alike in another way as well. At the end of the play, when Othello is under arrest and Iago has been apprehended and is brought into his presence, Othello says, "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable" (V.ii.286). He is looking to see if Iago has cloven feet like the devil Othello now thinks him to be. But for all of Iago's hatred of Othello and Othello's newly discovered contempt for Iago, the two are very much alike in their sense of being excluded from upper-class Venetian society. When Othello calls him honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.154), he speaks of more than verbal truth. Iago is the only character who speaks directly to Othello's sense of his own inadequacy, a sense of inadequacy Iago perhaps shares. At the end of the play, after killing Roderigo and Emilia and revealing all he has done, Iago is taken prisoner.

#### **Additional Character Commentary:**

If anything, Iago is an even stronger character than Othello. Unlike the internally-torn Moor, Iago is certain and entirely consistent in his acts and in his self-appraisals. For the sake of expediency, of course, Iago shows himself to be what he is not, a loyal supporter of Othello with limited capacity to help his "friend." But more than any other character in Shakespeare's plays, Iago is a self-professed villain whose sole motive is hatred toward his superior. It is the unrelievedly evil, maniacal fixation of Iago that provides such lines as his off-hand comment, "I am a very villain else" (IV.i.125), with their acute pungency. Before piecing it together, Iago's wife consoles a distraught Desdemona reeling from her husband's inexplicable tirade:

I will be hang'd if some eternal villain,  
Some busy and insinuating rogue,  
Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,  
Have not devis'd this slander.  
(IV.ii.130–133)

The person who is most intimate with Iago, his wife, furnishes the most accurate account of him in declaring the person behind Othello's rage to be an "eternal villain," who is large in his capacity to concoct evil but ultimately a small-minded slave acting on a relatively petty resentment.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

### **Othello (Character Analysis)**

Othello, a Moor, is a general of the Venetian armed forces. He is a noble and imposing man, well respected in his profession as soldier. At the beginning of the play, he enjoys great successes and everything seems to be going his way. Desdemona has chosen him over all of her other Venetian suitors, and Othello prevails over Brabantio's charges that Othello has coerced and abducted her. The duke of Venice and the Venetian senators place him in charge of the troops sent to defend Cyprus against the Turks. Things continue to go Othello's way when he arrives in Cyprus and discovers that the tempest has entirely eliminated the Turkish threat. He and Desdemona act differently toward each other in Cyprus. They are more openly loving, much less formal than they appeared in Venice. The couple celebrate their marriage; and, even when that celebration is interrupted by the brawling of Cassio and Montano, Othello still appears confident and self-controlled. In the tradition of the best strong-armed heroic types, he says, "He that stirs next to carve for his own rage / Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion" (II.iii.173–74). He is a man in charge, one that will shoot first and ask



questions later. But Othello's confidence starts to slip when Iago begins to work on his psyche, intimating that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair.

At first, Othello denies that the attractiveness of his wife's grace, charm, and beauty for other men could make him jealous because, as he says "she had eyes and chose me" (III.iii.189). But Iago's "medicine" (IV.i.46) soon begins to work, and Othello begins to question how Desdemona could continue to love him. After Iago has suggested that Desdemona has already deceived her father and Othello, the Moor begins to think Desdemona's betrayal of him is inevitable given his skin color, greater age, and lack of courtly charm (III.iii.263–68). He begins to act as if her unfaithfulness is a certainty, bemoaning that "Othello's occupation is gone" (III.iii.357).

Iago works Othello into a jealous rage through these many insinuations. But it seems to be the handkerchief—the one Othello originally gave to Desdemona as a love token—that puts Othello over the edge. Iago convinces Othello that the innocently dropped handkerchief was actually given to Cassio (who in turn gives the handkerchief to Bianca) by Desdemona. Othello focuses on this piece of cloth as damning physical evidence in his confrontation with his wife. He refers to it repeatedly before he kills Desdemona: "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee, / Thou gav'st to Cassio" (V.ii.48–9); "By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand" (V.ii.62); and again, "I saw the handkerchief" (V.ii.65). Desdemona repeatedly denies giving the handkerchief to Cassio, suggesting that perhaps he found it somewhere, but to no avail.

In the end, Othello is so convinced by Iago's manipulation that he murders his wife in their bed. The most apparent reason for this deed is the one Othello gives to Emilia, stated repeatedly in response to her persistent questioning, immediately after he has smothered Desdemona: "She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore"; "She was false as water"; "Cassio did top her" (V.ii.132; 134; 136). Desdemona, Othello believes, has betrayed him and the sanctity of marriage, and she paid with her life.

Yet some believe that Othello's motives run deeper, that Othello killed Desdemona because she violated the mores of Venetian society by marrying a Moor. Proponents of this view argue that Othello is accepted by Venetian society as long as he is an external element of that society. Barbantio and the Venetian senators are more than willing to accept his strength and military knowledge, but when Othello is internalized into their society by his marriage to Desdemona, his presence becomes disruptive. In his last speech, Othello asks to be remembered as "one that lov'd not wisely but too well" (V.ii.344). Is the object of that love Desdemona or Venice? Perhaps Othello never stops seeing himself as a soldier with the primary goal of preserving Venetian society. Perhaps his last act—his own suicide—is performed in the service of Venice, as mirrored in the language he uses to introduce it. He says that those around him should record events exactly as they have happened,

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him—thus.  
(V.ii.352–56)

The last word of this speech is punctuated by the sound of Othello's knife sinking into his breast and mortally wounding him.

### **Additional Character Analysis:**

In his final speech and for the sake of posterity, Othello refers to himself as "one that loved not wisely but too well" (V.ii.344). But from our standpoint, Othello's self-assessment seems wide and short of the mark. Othello is an accomplished, experienced man of the world in his own estimation and in the eyes of the Venetian society; not only has he seen much in his career as a military leader, he is able to convey that

experience to others. Defending himself to the Duke against Brabantio's charges, Othello says of his first encounters with the aggrieved senator's daughter:

It was my hint to speak—such was my process;  
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
(Do grow) beneath their shoulders. These things to hear  
Would Desdemona seriously incline:  
But still the house affairs would draw her thence;  
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,  
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse.  
(I.iii.142–150)

Even Othello's indirect, summary references to the tales that underpin his life, renown and station in society is marvelous; we can hear the word "Anthropophagi" booming from the Moor and visualize those aliens whose heads hang below their shoulders. In Act I, Othello appears to be a man who is confident of his own worth. Nevertheless, by the end of the play's final act, Othello is completely at a loss concerning what her debasement says about him, her husband. He wrestles with himself while on the verge of smothering Desdemona in the final scene of the play:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood;  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light:  
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,  
I can again thy former light restore,  
(V.ii.1–9)

The confusion that Othello suffers at this point cannot be untangled by him or (fully) by us. But here we see Othello justify the killing of Desdemona to save her good name, and this connotes that he has confused his wife's (and victim's) with his own (as both victim and perpetrator).

What strikes us about Othello and what explains in part the extent of his decline from hero–leader to savage beast is just how easily he is led by Iago down the path to self–destruction. Othello thinks he knows Iago; Iago truly knows his long–time superior and exactly how to manipulate him. He knows, for example, that Othello's self–confident posture rests upon his good name in Venetian society. Although that name is itself based on a legion of military heroics, it can be sullied. Moreover, Iago knows that Othello, a man who has spent most of his life in the field, is unsure of himself in civil society and in his role as the governor of Cyprus. In the end, the Moor is an outsider, a hired gun of Venice, on guard for threats and potentially suspicious of those who welcome him should his reputation or esteem in their eyes undergo a change.

» [Back to Section Index](#)  
» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Roderigo (Character Analysis)

Roderigo is a Venetian desperately desiring Desdemona. He is identified in the *Dramatis Personae* as a gull, a dupe or easy mark. Roderigo is gullible; he believes everything Iago tells him and does everything Iago commands of him. At the beginning of the play, at Iago's instigation, he alarms Brabantio with the news that Desdemona has eloped with the Moor. He sails with Iago to Cyprus and, while there, serves as a pawn in Iago's plan to destroy Othello and Cassio. Upon instruction, he picks a fight with Cassio when the latter keeps watch during the general celebration. Later, he attacks Cassio in the dark and wounds him, suffering a wound himself. Roderigo has given Iago money to negotiate with Desdemona on his behalf and thinks that the tasks Iago assigns him are intended only to remove Cassio from the picture, paving Roderigo's way to possessing Desdemona. Although his actions are despicable, he does evoke a measure of sympathy in the way that he is so utterly manipulated and ultimately betrayed by Iago, who stabs the wounded Roderigo on the dark street in order that he might not reveal Iago's involvement in Cassio's wounding.

Roderigo is continually threatening to quit his pursuit of Desdemona and cease giving Iago money for his intervention in that matter. Each time he does so, Iago assures him that Desdemona's attraction to Othello is only physical and that she will tire of the Moor fairly quickly. Iago suggests that Roderigo's best course of action is to accumulate a solid financial foundation. Iago tells Roderigo over and over to "Put money in thy purse" (I.iii.339–58), implying that, when Desdemona has satisfied her sexual lust, she will be attracted to the rich and stable sort of man. At one point, in his frustration at not realizing his goal, Roderigo says, "It is silliness to live, when to live is torment" (I.iii.307). He apologizes for being so silly but says he does not have the "virtue" to change, to which Iago responds, "Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves we are thus or thus" (I.iii.319). Iago maintains that men make of themselves what they desire to be; men do not follow a course predetermined by any inner qualities. Iago's advice seems to renew Roderigo's resolve even as his threatened suicide gives evidence to the intensity of his longing for Desdemona.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Other Characters (Descriptions)

### Attendants

Othello and Desdemona are characters of some stature in the communities of both Venice and Cyprus. In their public appearances throughout the play, they are often accompanied by attendants.

### Bianca

Bianca is a courtesan, a prostitute, in Cyprus. She falls in love with Cassio and pursues him, an unexpected turn of events given the callousness and lack of affection usually associated with her profession. Iago is aware that Cassio is not as affectionate toward Bianca as she is toward him, and he takes advantage of the one-sided relationship. On the pretext that he is questioning Cassio about Desdemona, Iago really questions Cassio about Bianca. He does this in order to increase Othello's jealousy, as the latter stands off to the side unable to hear but able to see Cassio's cavalier and mocking attitude. When Cassio finds the handkerchief belonging to Othello and planted in his quarters by Iago, he gives it to Bianca so that she might remove its valuable stitching. This fortunate event lends itself to Iago's plan since it increases Othello's hatred of Cassio, who seemingly equates Desdemona with a common prostitute.

### Clown

In a comic interlude that temporarily breaks the building tension, the clown appears and speaks to a group of musicians who have been directed by Cassio to play outside the quarters of Desdemona and Othello. The clown tells the musicians they sound nasal, alluding to the nasal damage done in advanced cases of syphilis.

The clown also engages in some low-brow humor involving a "tale" and a "wind instrument" (III.i.10). The clown appears again in III.iv, punning evasively in response to Desdemona's simple inquiry as to whether or not the clown knows where Cassio lives.

### **Duke of Venice**

See Venice

### **Gentlemen (of Cyprus)**

When the play switches location to Cyprus, two gentlemen talk to Montano, the governor there, about the raging storm tossing the Turkish fleet. A third gentleman enters and announces that the storm has scattered the Turkish fleet, causing the Turks to abandon their intended invasion of Cyprus. He also reports that a Venetian ship has been wrecked and that Cassio worries the ship might have been the one carrying Othello. The second of the first two gentlemen identifies Iago when he disembarks. Later, armed gentlemen appear with Othello when he interrupts the fight between Cassio and Montano and chastises those two for brawling.

### **Gratiano**

Gratiano is a kinsman of Brabantio. In some editions of the play, he is listed as Brabantio's brother. Other editions list him and Lodovico as two noble Venetians. Gratiano appears in the dark streets of Cyprus just after Roderigo has stabbed Cassio. He helps minister to Cassio and sort out the identities of others in the confusing darkness. He is also present when Emilia accuses Othello of killing Desdemona and when Othello is apprehended. His chief function in the play seems to be one of eliciting explanations from the other characters, providing them with the opportunity to sort out complex events. Twice near the end of the play he asks, "What is the matter?" (V.ii.170, 259).

### **Herald**

The herald is sent by Othello to make a public proclamation: in celebration of the Turkish fleet's defeat and Othello's marriage, the populace is directed to feast, make bonfires, and dance, each man pursuing his own sport. This celebration is to continue from five to eleven that night.

### **Lodovico**

Lodovico is Brabantio's kinsman. (Some editions of the play list Gratiano as Brabantio's brother and Lodovico as Brabantio's kinsman. Other editions list them both simply as two noble Venetians.) When Lodovico arrives in Cyprus, he and Othello greet one another with civil courtesy. Lodovico brings a letter from the duke of Venice, in which Othello is commanded to return to Venice immediately, Cassio taking his place of command in Cyprus. As Othello reads the letter, he overhears Lodovico ask Desdemona if the rift between the general and the lieutenant can be repaired. Desdemona is hopeful and says, "I would do much / To atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio" (IV.i.232–33). Although she means only that she is concerned for Cassio, Othello strikes her. Othello's action astounds Lodovico. When Othello leaves, Lodovico asks, "Is this the noble Moor whom our Senate / Call all-in-all sufficient?" (IV.i.264–65). He wonders aloud if the letter has caused Othello to experience such a wild mood swing. Lodovico is present later when Othello is apprehended and all finally realize that Othello has killed Desdemona.

### **Messenger**

Two messengers appear in the play. The first reports to the Venetian senators that a Turkish fleet of approximately thirty ships has threatened Rhodes but has since turned and headed for Cyprus. The second messenger appears as Cassio and Montano express concern for Othello's survival on the torrid sea. He announces that all of the townspeople have gathered on the shore to keep watch of the turbulent ocean and have spotted the sail of a ship.

### **Montana**

Montano is the governor of Cyprus. He has sent a messenger to the duke of Venice, confirming the presence

of the Turkish fleet near Cyprus. He welcomes the Venetian protectors when they arrive on his isle, anxious for Othello's safety and elated when the tempest scatters the Turkish threat. As all celebrate the defeat of the Turks and Othello's marriage, Cassio must leave the celebration to go watch. Iago slyly tells Montano that Cassio is an excellent man, but not when he has been drinking. He plays on Montano's concern and suggests that Cassio is not one to whom the safety of the isle should be entrusted. Then, when Roderigo attacks Cassio and the latter cries out, Montano goes to investigate the matter. From his very recent conversation with Iago, he is predisposed to see Cassio's actions as irresponsible; he accuses Cassio of being drunk, and the two men fight, the sounding of a general alarm disrupting the peace of the isle and rousing an irate Othello from his nuptial bed. Montano is present in the later scenes in which the former confusion is sorted out.

### **Musicians**

See Clown

### **Officers**

Officers appear in the company of both Brabantio and Othello when the two confront each other, Brabantio charging Othello with having abducted his daughter, and Othello maintaining his innocence of that charge. One of the officers confirms that the duke of Venice wants to see Othello immediately. Officers appear in the company of the duke, and the Venetian senators try to deduce the intentions of the Turkish fleet. Again, at the end of the play, officers appear with Iago in their custody after having captured the fleeing villain.

### **Sailors**

In I.iii, the duke and the Venetian senators have assembled to try and determine Turkish military intentions. A sailor enters and reports that the Turkish fleet is menacing Rhodes.

### **Senators**

In the republican city-state of Venice, the senators were powerful men who, along with the duke, made laws and insured public welfare. In I.iii, the senators have come together to plan a way to counter the military intentions of the Turks. They have received conflicting reports of the Turkish fleet's whereabouts, first seen heading towards Rhodes and later towards Cyprus. One of the senators deduces that the Turkish move on Rhodes is just a feinting maneuver, their real target being Cyprus. This conjecture is confirmed by the messenger from Montano. The senators have sent for Othello, whose military expertise they desperately need in countering the impending attack on Cyprus. They are present when Brabantio pleads his case before the duke, arguing that Othello has bewitched and stolen his daughter Desdemona. We might imagine that they, like the duke, are not inclined to support Brabantio's suit since, under the present circumstances, Othello's services are urgently required.

### **Venice (Duke of Venice)**

The duke of Venice is concerned about the safety of Venice and its interests in Cyprus. He and the Venetian senators have assembled to try and figure out where the Turkish fleet intends to attack. After hearing conflicting reports about Turkish intentions, it is determined that the Turks will attack Cyprus. The duke summons Othello in order to place the defense of Cyprus in his hands. But Othello is being accused by Brabantio of using witchcraft to seduce his daughter. When Brabantio and Othello are brought into the duke's presence, the duke agrees to hear Brabantio's case. Othello counters the charge that he has used witchcraft by relating how he enthralled Desdemona with tales of his suffering and his adventures. When he is done, the duke says, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.iii.171). After Desdemona confirms what Othello has said to be true, the duke rules against Brabantio, something he may have been less inclined to do on an occasion when Othello's services were not so desperately needed. The duke then tries to repair the rift between Brabantio and the newly wedded couple. He says, "The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief; / He robs himself that spends a bootless grief" (I.iii.208–9). The duke is urging Brabantio to be generous and accept things he cannot change.

- » [Back to Section Index](#)
- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Principal Topics

Perhaps the predominant impression created by *Othello* is that of the terrible destructiveness of jealousy. Othello's suspicions regarding Desdemona's fidelity provoke him to rage and violence, and the collapse of his pride and nobility is swift. The speed and intensity of these changes in the hero have led some critics to question whether Iago's insinuations actually cause Othello's doubts or merely unleash his pre-existing fears. Shakespeare's analysis of the nature of jealousy is not limited only to the character of Othello, however. Both Roderigo and Bianca are torn by jealousy: he desires Desdemona and she yearns for Cassio. More importantly, Iago displays numerous symptoms of jealousy. His bitterness at being passed over for promotion and his suspicions that his wife has had an affair with Othello prompt his desire for revenge and give rise to his malicious schemes. Although various forms of jealousy are displayed by these characters, they are all based on unreasonable fears and lead to equally irrational behavior.

Another significant aspect of *Othello*, one related to the jealousy theme, is Shakespeare's manipulation of time in the play. For centuries, readers have noted that the play has a dual time scheme: "short" time, in which the action on stage is an unbroken sequence of events taking place over the course of a very few days; and "long" time, in which characters' statements and other indications suggest that a much greater period of time has passed. Thus, for example, a close reading reveals that all the events from his arrival on Cyprus to Othello's death take place in less than two days. This compression of time heightens the sense of reckless passion and the extreme rapidity of Othello's fall. By contrast, Othello's references to Desdemona's "stolen hours of lust" (III. iii. 338) and to his sleeping well in ignorance of the supposed trysts between his wife and Cassio, as well as Bianca's chastisement of Cassio for keeping "a week away . . . seven days and nights . . . eight score eight hours" (III. iv. 173–74), reflect a longer passage of time. This extension of time may reflect the irrational quality of Othello's and Bianca's jealousy, by which their fears cause them to exaggerate. At the same time, it makes their doubts seem more plausible: if days or weeks have passed, there has indeed been time for repeated trysts between Desdemona and Cassio. Furthermore, in "long time" Othello's decline appears less sudden and absurd, thereby preserving the audience's sympathy with the proud and noble Moor.

Shakespeare's presentation of a black man as the hero of this tragedy has provoked much comment. In Shakespeare's England, blacks were considered exotic rarities. They were commonly feared as dangerous, threatening figures, sexually unrestrained and primitive. On stage, blacks were often stereotyped as villains; Shakespeare himself had employed this figure in Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. With his presentation of the proud, virtuous soldier Othello, Shakespeare defies many of these stereotypes. In fact, actors and critics for centuries insisted that this noble "Moor" was an Arab rather than an African. However, several characters display racist attitudes and clearly designate Othello as black; this discrimination is most notable in Iago, who not only expresses his own racism but plays on the prejudices of others in his schemes against Othello. Thus, while rejecting stereotypes in his depiction of Othello, Shakespeare also presents characters who attack the hero's color and use his race to isolate and destroy him.

- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Essays

1. [The Role of Race in Othello](#)
2. [The Villainy of Iago](#)

3. [Deception in Othello](#)
4. [The Ironic Interdependence of Othello and Iago](#)
5. [Why does Desdemona Marry Othello?](#)
6. [Why Does Othello Change His Mind About Desdemona's Fidelity?](#)
7. [The Women of Othello](#)
8. [Geography in Othello](#)
9. [Opposites Attract: Othello and Desdemona](#)
10. [The Use of Humor in Othello](#)
11. ["The Cause" in Shakespeare's Othello](#)
12. [An Analysis of Four Shakespearean Villains](#)

## The Role of Race in Othello

Essay examining the role of Othello's race — includes a discussion on racial views during the Elizabethan period as contrasted with contemporary views.

The historical development of racial relations between Shakespeare's time and our own has virtually compelled twentieth-century critics of Othello to consider the title character's status as a black man in a predominantly white society. Some modern interpreters of the play have focused on Othello's race as a causal or, at the very least, aggravating factor in the tragedy that befalls him. Others have gone so far as to assert that Shakespeare's Moor is the victim of racial discrimination, if not directly at the hands of Iago's, then indirectly at the hand of the play's author. This, in turn, has generated substantial historical research into the racial attitudes of Shakespeare and of Elizabethan England at large. The results of this effort have been ambivalent: in all probability, white Englishmen of the early seventeenth century (including the Bard) saw themselves as inherently superior to non-Europeans, but they were not racial bigots in our contemporary sense of that word. What can be said for certain is that instances of actual contact between Elizabethan Englishmen and non-whites were exceedingly rare, that the New World slave trade had not yet emerged, and that Shakespeare (and his audiences) looked upon Africans (and other racial "minorities") in a decidedly different light than we do.

Othello is not the only or even the first black character in Shakespeare's stage works. Prior to his composition of Othello, Shakespeare wrote Titus Andronicus, an early Roman tragedy in which the character of Aaron, described like Othello as a Moor, acts as a secondary villain to Titus himself in a work so bloody that its attribution to Shakespeare has occasionally been questioned. But Titus Andronicus was undoubtedly written by Shakespeare and the Moor Aaron is unquestionable evil. Indeed, on the cusp of his execution, Aaron repents of any good deed that he might have inadvertently done! There is a strong implication here that Aaron's evil has a genetic basis. The child whom he sires through Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, is described by the Nurse who acts as midwife as being "as loathesome as a toad" among the fair-faced race of ancient Rome. The strength of the blood connection between Aaron and his offspring is underscored by his exceptional fondness toward his infant son and the scheme to substitute a white baby for the Moor's progeny.

Despite having a black forerunner in Aaron, Othello's presence on the stage as the main character of a Shakespearean tragedy represented something new to Elizabethan audiences. Unlike Aaron, Othello is the chief protagonist of the play in which he appears, and we are forced by its narrative structure to see things through his eyes while knowing that he is being deceived by Iago. The first mention of Othello's race occurs before his initial entrance on stage with Roderigo pejoratively calling him "thicklips" (I.66), a slur that is also applied to Aaron's baby by the Nurse who conveys the infant to him. Iago is even more offensive in his inflammatory remarks to Desdemona's father, telling Brabantio, "even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tuppung your white ewe" (I, i, ll.89–90). Iago's polarity establishes skin color and its mixture through

miscegenation as an immutable standard for discriminating natural from unnatural acts.

Shakespeare's primary source for Othello was a mid–sixteenth century novella by the Italian author Cinthio, and while Othello is depicted sympathetically in this work, Cinthio's Moor differs from Shakespeare's in that the Bard emphasizes Othello's Christianity while his prototype is a Muslim. Othello is at least functionally integrated into Venetian society. His importance to the state as its military champion and bulwark against the Turks, confers status on Othello that is equivalent to that of Brabantio, a senator with a double voice, and, as the Duke's decision makes clear, greater than that of Desdemona's distinguished father. Prior to Othello's affair with his daughter, Brabantio invited the Moor to his home, treating this black man as his peer.

But while Othello is an indispensable arm of the Venetian body politic, he is nonetheless an outsider, and Othello is very much aware of his position as such. Thus, in Act I, scene iii, Othello notes that he is a mercenary on a "rented field" (I, iii. 1.85), having served Venice for seven years and having gone nine months without seeing action, military exploits being essential to his identity within Venetian society. On the surface, Othello's black skin color is less of a racial than a cultural discriminator, it marks Othello as an alien who does not fully understand the mores (and corruptions) of his adopted homeland.

Nevertheless, strands of racial stereotyping rather than a simply division between Venetians and non–Venetians, do surface in Othello. Brabantio accuses Othello of witchcraft, contending that the Moor must have used "drugs and minerals" to overcome Desdemona's natural aversion to his "sooty bosom." In Act III, scene iv, Othello's explanation of the missing handkerchief's provenance implies that his mother engaged in charms that she acquired through traffic with other non–whites, in this case, an Egyptian. In the minds of Shakespeare's audiences, blacks were identified with witchcraft and other non–Christian superstitions.

Race plays less of an overt, direct role in Othello than many twentieth–century critics of the play assign to it. Othello's complexion is emblematic of his status as an outsider in a society that has carved out an exception for him that is nonetheless conditional on his usefulness to Venice. Underneath this, Othello's association with witchcraft and his eventual devolution into a bestial frenzy reflect highly–biased stereotypes of blacks that were commonly–held in Shakespeare's England but by no means identical to those imposed upon blacks in subsequent historical periods, including our own.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **The Villainy of Iago**

Essay examining the character of Iago and his villainy.

Shakespeare assigns the final say in Othello to the relative minor character of Lodovico, a representative Venetian nobleman, a blood relative to Desdemona, and the moral arbiter of the play. He turns directly to Iago, places full responsibility for the carnage at hand (including Othello's suicide) upon the "Spartan dog" before him whom he then characterizes as a "hellish villain" (V, ii, 1.368). Throughout the tragedy, Iago himself uses figurative language that connects him to Hell, the demonic and the archfiend Satan. He promises that Roderigo will enjoy Desdemona "for my wits and all the tribe of hell" (I, iii., 1.357), expounds upon the "Divinity of hell!" in Act II, scene iii.(II.350ff), and remarks that the poison of his dangerous conceits "burn like the mines of sulphur" (III, iii, 1.329). And, right before he wounds Iago, Othello cries out, "If thou bes't devil, I cannot kill thee" (V, ii., 1.288). This strand of Satanic imagery magnifies Iago and the enormity of his crimes to mythic proportions, furnishing him with a stature akin to Shakespeare's Richard III, for example.



Nevertheless, upon close scrutiny, we find that Shakespeare deliberately undercuts Iago's implicit claim to being a great villain. There are, to begin, other characters and even inanimate substances that evoke the language of the demonic. In Act IV, scene i., the raging Othello curses out "Fire and brimstone" at his wife and calls Desdemona "Devil" as he strikes her (l.240). Earlier Cassio rues his bout with the "invisible spark of wine," saying of it "(I) call thee devil" (II, iii, l.282). Iago, then, is not the only "devil" in the play, and is, in fact, more a villain of words than of substance.

In the play's first scene, Iago spells out his grounds for hating Othello to Roderigo (and the audience) and they seem comparatively petty. Iago explains that his ill will toward the Moor stems from Othello's decision to pass over Iago and name Michael Cassio as his second in command. Iago gives some point to his grudge by contrasting the "bookish theoretic" nature of his rival's qualifications with his own credentials as a proven military officer. He tells Roderigo that three "great ones" of the city pressed his suit to Othello, but that their petition was of no avail, Iago stooping to mimicry of the Moor's replay, "'I have already chose my officer.'" He then denounces the "modern" (and presumably corrupt) Venetian system of career advancement, "Preferment goes by letter and affection/And not by old gradation, where each second/Stood heir to the first." (I, i., ll.36–37). As a motive for his hatred of Othello, Iago's complaint is weak, amounting to a labor dispute. Moreover, while he focuses upon the Moor's rejection of his suit for advancement, Iago also tells us that Othello's choice is consistent with the whole civil culture of Venice, with the system so to speak. In fact, while railing against favoritism, Iago himself has used the agency of special pleading through great ones. On the surface, the source of Iago's animus toward Othello is a mere career problem, and this is not the stuff that moves great villains.

Customarily, Shakespeare's great villains, Richard III or Edmund the bastard of King Lear are given the opportunity to identify themselves as the evil force at work. Othello makes it plain that he has a reason to resent Othello, but the first reference to him as a villain comes in the form of a mundane curse by Brabantio responding to the lewd remarks of a "profane wretch" (I, i, ll.117–118). Iago is given a second bite at the "I am the villain" soliloquy toward the first scene's conclusion, saying of Othello and his behavior toward him, "Though I do hate him as I do hell–pains,/Yet, for necessity of present life/I must show out a flag and a sign of love/Which indeed is but a sign" (I, I, ll.154–156). What is striking about this speech is its redundancy: it simply reiterates what Iago has already said to Roderigo. It lacks both the stature and the dramatic punch of an opening "villain" soliloquy in Shakespeare's other tragedies.

Then there is the quality of the opposition that Iago faces. It too is weak, consisting of an insecure, boy–like Othello, a susceptible Cassio, and Desdemona, a mere girl at the time of her marriage to the Moor. The reason that Othello is no match for Iago's evil wits is that the Moor is a "credulous fool" (IV, i., l.35) as Iago notes, who is, in Emilia's words, "as ignorant as dirt" (V, ii, l.164). We are reminded of just how gullible Othello each of the several times in which he refers to Iago as a "most honest" man. As for Cassio, Iago is able to induce the Lieutenant to drink (despite Cassio's acknowledgment that he cannot hold his wine), simply by singing a couple of soldier's drinking ditties to him. And, as for Desdemona, Iago sidesteps her altogether, confining this misdirection to the Moor and his second in command. The poor quality of Iago's unsuspecting adversaries reduces our sense of his greatness as a villain.

But it is the makeshift opportunism of Iago's *modus operandi* that distinguishes him as a decidedly lower–case villain. At the very outset of the play we learn that Iago is dependent upon Roderigo's purse, and in Act I, scene iii, Iago "sells" the youth a bill of goods in his "put money in thy purse" speech (ll.334–361). The question becomes: if Iago is so bad, why isn't he rich? The truth is, Iago has no master plan for Othello's undoing, but is constrained to use whatever circumstances provide as the material for his schemes. In Act II, scene i., Iago watches as Cassio takes Desdemona by the hand and asserts, "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (ll.168–169). In fact, this incident has no part in Iago's deception of Othello. Looking back, Iago's successes are conditional upon mere circumstance, the ocular proof of the handkerchief coming into Iago's possession by a combination of its accidentally dropping to the floor and then being

discovered by an Emilia who is essentially indifferent toward her husband Iago's plans for it.

Rather than the grand design of a great villain, Iago's actions are spur of the moment affairs, as when he stabs Cassio in the leg and then pins the deed upon Roderigo. In that incident (Act V, scene i.), Iago considers the possibilities at hand, saying that he cannot lose because either Roderigo will slay Cassio or the two will kill each other. He completely fails to foresee the third (and logical) alternative that Cassio prevails, the outcome that compels him to act. It is, moreover, in a fit of rage that Iago stabs Emilia, thereby affirming his culpability for past crimes and committing a new transgression before official witnesses.

All of this suggests that Iago is more of a dog than a devil. As Emilia guesses at the cause of Othello's rage toward her mistress Desdemona, she Emilia says that "some eternal villain/Some busy and insinuating rogue,/Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office/Have not devis'd this slander" (IV, ii. ll.130–133) Iago replies that that there is no such man, and, in doing so, undercut his own claims to being an "eternal villain." In his wife's eyes, Iago is more slave than devil, and here we observe that the text contains intimations that Iago is the very thing that he uses to provoke Othello's rage, a cuckold. Iago alludes to his suspicions about his wife's infidelity with Othello (I, iii., ll.385–386), that subject is broached again in Act IV by Emilia (IV, ii., l.149), and she later says to Desdemona that she is willing to commit adultery (IV, iii., l.70). In the end, the horns that Iago sports are more like those of a cuckold than those of Satan.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Deception in Othello

Essay examining the role of deception in the play, as seen through the action of the main characters: Othello, Iago, and Desdemona.

Othello is, at heart, a play about deception, and the emotional turmoil and mental anguish it can cause. Although Iago aptly demonstrates all that is evil through his malevolent manipulation of others, he is not the only practitioner of deception in the play. Othello himself can also be regarded as a study in deception, albeit of a much more subtle variety than that of the gleefully fiendish Iago; for Othello engages in self-deception – less obvious, but eventually just as destructive. Indeed, the only character above reproach is the guileless Desdemona; enmeshed in a web of steel through the deception of others, she nevertheless continues in her sweetly innocent way, ultimately attaining a heroic stature through her refusal, in sharp juxtaposition to Othello and Iago, to blame others for her suffering.

Othello is an outsider in Venetian society. He is a black man among white men, and a soldier among civilians. To the Venetians, he is simply 'the Moor' (I,iii,47), a description that neatly encapsulates his state as a foreigner. The term is indelibly associated with negative racial connotations – Iago describes Othello as 'an old black ram' (I,i,88) and 'the devil' (I,i,91), while Rodrigo calls him 'gross' and 'lascivious' (I,i,126). Othello, while unaware of the slanders of Iago, is only too aware of his precious position in the Venetian power structure. Hence, he creates for himself a new identity, a new sense of self that transcends the one-dimensionality of 'the Moor'. He cannot change his origins – although as he lets Iago know (I,ii,19–24) he is descended from 'men of royal siege' – but he can fill his persona with something uniquely Othello, to lose the negative connotations of 'the Moor' and create for himself a unique identity. He attempts this in his wooing of Desdemona – his new identity is the 'story of (his) life' (I,iii,129), and it is so intensely moving and personal that Desdemona is entranced. Ironically, there is a sense that Othello feels threatened by Desdemona's enthusiasm: she would 'listen with a greedy ear' to devour (his)discourse'(I,iii,150), and Othello feels compelled to concoct even more fantastical tales: 'of the cannibals that each other eat, /the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/ do grow beneath their shoulders' (I,iii,143–145). Othello's attempt to

break the shackles of being 'the Moor' has resulted in the construction of an elaborate façade of self-deception; he has constructed a new identity, but one somewhat removed from the flesh-and-bone Othello. This dissonance is evident if we compare his proposed 'round unvarnish'd tale' (I,iii,90) with the elaborate travelogue he finally delivers in lines 128–170. He is insistently self-dramatising, but curiously uncertain of his true worth; and it is this uncertainty that allows Iago to breed the 'green-eyed monster' of jealousy in his mind.

Iago is a master of deception. He appears frank and honest to all the other characters and it is only to the audience that he reveals his innermost thoughts. Roderigo knows some of what Iago plans, and supposedly why he plans it; but his knowledge is kept limited by Iago. Iago works through subtle hints and allusions, and exploits his 'honest' reputation ruthlessly. However, even the seemingly cocksure Iago is not immune to the 'monster' of jealousy; indeed, he too is infected by it 'like a poisonous mineral' (II,i,292). Unlike Othello, however, Iago recognises his infection and the effect it has on himself. He does not delude himself about what he is, or what he plans to achieve. Ultimately, his peculiar brand of evil comes to nothing, his plans destroyed by the unforeseen courage of his wife Emilia. His deception turns back on him and he is exposed as the petty man he is. The malevolence is still there, but the grand scale of evil is reduced to the flailing of an embittered human being.

On another level, the play deals with the deception of the senses – both of sight and sound. Othello demands from Iago 'ocular proof' (III,iii,366) of his wife's infidelity, but his vision, corrupted by the 'green-ey'd monster' (III,iii,170), is satisfied by mere 'imputation and strong circumstance' (III,iii,412). Iago's trickery in convincing Othello that his conversation with Cassio (followed by the fortuitous arrival of Bianca) in IV, i, 97–157 concerns the seduction of Desdemona, illustrates the extent to which Othello's senses have been deluded and corrupted. Othello eavesdrops over the conversation between Iago and Cassio, but interprets the words to suit the state of his diseased mind: 'Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?' (IV,i,118). He cannot see or hear for himself, and must rely on the false information 'fed' to him. And this occurs shortly after his body has been reduced to the fit (IV,i,43) in which all his senses are confused and jangled. Indeed, his greatest fear has been physically realised: 'perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee, and when I love thee not/Chaos is come again.' (III,iii,91–93) When Emilia vouches steadfastly for her mistress' chastity, the poison in Othello's ears dismisses her evidence as the ignorance of a 'simple bawd' (IV,ii,20). The ultimate deception takes place in the soft, slow death scene of Desdemona. Othello is instinctively drawn towards Desdemona's beauty, but in a perverse self-delusion, comes to see himself as a personification of 'justice', killing Desdemona 'else she'll betray more men' (V,ii,6). Iago's slanders have poisoned Othello's senses, and the evil of the deception results in the tragedy of Desdemona's death.

If Iago is a portrait of evil, then Desdemona must be the definitive embodiment of chaste beauty. She forsakes friends, family and wealth in Venice to spend her life with the man to whom she 'consecrated' her 'soul and fortunes' (I,iii,254). She loves Othello with all her mind, body and soul. Despite Othello's fears, she loves him, not an exotic image of the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere' because she claims that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I,iii,252). She is innocent, and completely without sophistication, and ultimately, a pawn to be exploited in Iago's obsessive plans. She bears all her tribulations with meekness, patience and without complaint, and remains committed to her husband even as she dies: 'Commend me to my kind Lord, O farewell!' (V,ii,126). She, alone, of all the characters, eschews intrigue and deception; her life is as pure and honest as her love for Othello. Some though, will take the side of Brabantio and see her treachery to him and his family. She does after all, deceive her father (I,iii,293), and elopes, escorted only by 'a knave of common hire' (I,i,125) to the arms of her beloved Othello; and there has been no inkling of the love suit Othello has pursued within Brabantio's own house. It is, perhaps, the weak point in Desdemona's character, but it may be excused by the overwhelming power of her love for Othello.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## The Ironic Interdependence of Othello and Iago

Essay discussing the relationship between Othello and Iago, focusing on the military context and interdependence of the relationship.

At the start of Othello, Iago makes very clear to Roderigo the apparent cause for his hatred of the general. His lack of promotion to lieutenant leads him to declare:

...be judge yourself,  
Whether I in any just term am affin'd  
To love the Moor. (I, i, 38–40.) FN1

As Roger Moore has pointed out in an essay accompanying this one, such a motive is not a grand-scale one, nor one which might cast Iago as the Universal Villain. His secondary motive, however, provides a different insight into his character, and provides the first instance of the theme which will dominate this play : sexual jealousy:

I hate the Moor,  
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets  
He's done my office; (I, iii, 384–386)

More than this, however, it is the very fact that he acknowledges the nature of the suspicion (rumour) and then dismisses it from his mind that shows the inherently insecure nature of this villain. He has fallen into the same trap over Cassio ('For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too' [II, i, 302]), and his jealousy is attested to even by his wife:

Some such squire he was,  
That turn'd your wit, the seamy side without,  
And made you suspect me with the Moor. (IV, ii, 147–149)

The deep-rooted cause for this combination of insecurity and jealousy lies deep within his psyche. We must remember the shared history of Othello and Iago, which in fact far transcends that shared by Othello and Desdemona. Othello makes much of the fact that,

...since these arms of mine had seven years' pith  
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
Their dearest action in the tented field. (I, iii, 83–86)

He also states that he does 'agnize/ A natural and prompt alacrity/I find in hardness.' (I, iii, 231–233). The Duke and his court all acknowledge Othello's military experience and command, and Lodovico recognises Othello's

solid virtue  
[which] The shot of accident nor dart of chance  
Could neither graze nor pierce (IV, i, 267–269)

This consistent military service of over thirty years (given Othello's own description of himself as 'declined/Into the vale of years' [III, iii, 267–268]) has left Othello without those 'soft parts of conversation/ That chamberers have. (III, iii, 265–266) We are also told, and have no reason to dispute it, that Iago has served with Othello at 'Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds/ Christian and heathen.' (I, i, 29–30). Iago is twenty eight years old (I, iii, 312) and is clearly a career soldier since he is chaffing over his lack of

promotion. As Harold Bloom points out (FN2), the inevitable comradeship between soldiers of this nature is both intense and binding. Although many of the characters throughout the play call Iago 'honest' and refer to his 'honesty', it is Othello who uses the epithet more frequently than anyone else. And against the background of protestation from Emilia, Desdemona herself and, eventually, Cassio, Othello is prepared to take the word of his 'Ancient' above all others. We might well ask why, apart from dramatic necessity, this should be the case.

The answer lies in the extraordinary comradeship which military service in the face of death can bring. No specific mention is made, but we might assume that Othello and Iago have fought side-by-side. It is, after all, where the General and the Ancient would be found. Iago reports the detail of how Othello has remained unmoved while those around him have been killed, with a veracity which indicates first-hand knowledge:

I have seen the cannon,  
When it hath blown his ranks into the air;  
And (like the devil) from his very arm  
Puff'd his own brother... (III, iv, 131–134)

The friendship and obligation brought about by this kind of service cannot be overlooked, and it provides a powerful shared history.

Rejection, therefore, by the General whom Iago has followed and served, is a blow which a man, insecure in other ways (his sexual jealousy of his wife) would find hard to shoulder. The fact that he had apparently been supported by 'three great ones of the city' (I, i, 7) in his quest for promotion is another indication, possibly, of not only his reputation within Venice, but of his disbelief in his fate. The disappointment is compounded by the selection of a Florentine (when the rivalry between the city states of Venice and Florence was intense) who is unhardened by military experience and 'That never set a squadron in the field.' (I, i, 22) It is consequently not such a great step from loyal and honest companion to 'villainous knave' and 'scurvy fellow' (IV, ii, 140–141) as Emilia ironically calls the unknown defamer of Desdemona's virtue. Scorned and overlooked by the great leader, Iago is left with nothing but his anger and his sense of abandonment. Despite his initial claims, he is not that interested in reclaiming the ladder of military promotion. It has, after all, rejected him, and the days of 'old gradation' (I, i, 37) based upon 'honest' service are gone. And, he is promoted to the position of Lieutenant at the end of III, iii. What is left to Iago is the sheer pleasure of destroying all that he had believed in, and which is reflected in Othello's eulogy over himself:

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!  
Farewell the pluméd troops, and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue – O, farewell!  
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,  
The spirit–stirring drum, th'ear–piercing fife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp, and circumstance, of glorious war! (III, iii, 350–355)

As Iago gloats at the loss of Othello's 'sweet sleep' displayed in the speech above, he fails to recognise the ironic reflection on himself. Iago is losing exactly what Othello is, for, as a career soldier, his links with Othello's experiences are inextricable.

Against this friendship and comradeship, forged in the hardships of war, the relationship between Othello and Desdemona does indeed show as something insubstantial. It is based clearly upon a misconception:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I loved her that she did pity them. (I, iii, 167–168)

Each has fallen in love with the romantic image of the other, not the physical reality. Again, as Bloom has pointed out, their courtship, marriage and their short time together after that event, leaves them very little opportunity either to get to know each other properly or, perhaps, even to consummate their marriage. Iago carefully marginalises Othello from his new wife by emphasising the differences in their background and cultural experience:

I know our country disposition well;  
In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands... (III, iii, 205–207)

He also reinforces the unnaturalness of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona who rejected 'many proposed matches/Of her own clime, complexion, and degree'. (III, iii, 233) The more Iago drives the wedge between Othello and his love, the more dependent Othello becomes on Iago, for, indeed, there is no-one else to whom he can turn. His lieutenant Cassio is suspected with Othello's wife, and on Cyprus, Othello is not in a position to explore his fears with relative strangers. Their past joins Iago and Othello, and their present enmeshes them even more firmly. For Othello, there is only Iago in whom he can trust and upon whom he can rely. 'Honest' Iago takes order for the death of Cassio; and 'honest, honest Iago' (V, ii, 155), Othello's 'friend' provides the circumstantial and 'ocular' proof of Desdemona's treachery. As Iago has planned, he has made Othello

...thank me, love me, and reward me,  
For making him egregiously as ass. (II, i, 303–304)

and Othello declares 'I am bound to thee forever.' (III, iii, 218). In the blackest of ironies, Iago returns the compliment after the sacrilegious oath-taking at the end of III, iii: 'I am your own for ever.' (line 486) Like an incubus, Iago now cannot exist without Othello, as it is Othello's destruction which gives purpose and direction to Iago's life. As Othello recognises that the mere appearance of the dead Desdemona will 'hurl my soul from heaven' (V, ii, 275), so he is even at the end of the play linked to the 'demi-devil' (302) and 'hellish villain' (369) who has 'ensnar'd [his] soul and body' (303). In planting the seeds of doubt and destruction in Othello, Iago planted the very seeds of his own fall:

'for what soever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' FN3

Notes

1. This, and all other textual references to Othello are from 'The Arden Shakespeare' edition, (Ed. M. R. Ridley, 1985 [Methuen, New York])

2. Bloom, Harold, (1999) : Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, (Fourth Estate, London)

3. Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, vi, 7

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Why does Desdemona Marry Othello?

Essay examining the character of Desdemona and the reasons for her marriage to Othello.

In the last scene of Othello, Desdemona recovers long enough from the smothering that her jealous husband has inflicted upon her to pronounce her complete innocence, and with her last breath tells Emilia, "a guiltless death I die" (V, ii., 1.120). Plainly, Iago has deceived Othello into believing that his beautiful young wife has

committed adultery with his once-trusted second in command, Cassio. That being so, Desdemona is clearly innocent of the charges embodied in Iago's cunning innuendoes, and is a victim who does not deserve the tragic end that she suffers. Nevertheless, Desdemona has put herself in a position to be a victim by virtue of her decision to marry the Moor and to go with him to the isolated, embattled post of Cyprus where Othello possesses not only the moral authority of a spouse but also the legal powers of a governor. The question naturally arises: Why does Desdemona make these tandem choices?

By the time that we first see Desdemona in the middle of Act I, scene iii, we have been told that she is a young Venetian noblewoman, the beloved daughter of Senator Brabantio, who has married the military hero of the city-state without her father's consent or foreknowledge. Desdemona certainly realizes that her elopement with Othello and her sharing of honeymoon quarters with this "Barbary horse" at the unsavory sounding Sagittary Inn is bound to evoke her father's wrath. Indeed, when we first hear Desdemona speak her "divided duty" defense (I, iii., ll.178–188), she appears to have anticipated the need to make her case to both Brabantio and the ruler(s) of Venice. Her plea is tightly reasoned and pivots upon a straightforward analogy between her own situation and that of her mother. Desdemona's speech is largely devoid of emotional appeal and rests upon the natural precedent of married women transferring their first loyalties from fathers to husbands. What she conveniently omits is that she has chosen to wed outside her station, to a man who is much older than she, of an entirely different race and, despite the accolades he has received, very much an outsider in Venice. Moreover, she has done all this under the pretense of being a mere listener to the stories of her father's invited guest. Realizing that the Duke will follow the expedient course and rule in favor of the newlyweds, Brabantio utters his warning to Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see/She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I,iii., 292–293). This admonition surfaces again in the "deception" scene as Iago uses it to spur Othello's suspicions, Brabantio's prominent reference to "eyes" resonating with the Moor's demand for "ocular proof" of his wife's infidelity. We are told in Act V that Brabantio has died of grief over his daughter's betrayal. Desdemona does not deserve to be murdered by Othello, but her father's curse has a firm basis, for she has in fact deceived her father.

What does Desdemona see in Othello that would cause her to take the rash step of choosing him as her husband? Following his recitation of the exotic adventure tales that he has related to Desdemona before their marriage, the Moor recalls Desdemona's response to these stories "yet she wish'd/That heaven had made her such a man/And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,/I should but teach him how to tell my story/And that would woo her" (I, iii., ll.162–166). What Othello fails to realize here is that Desdemona's reaction not only furnishes him with an opening to woo the girl, it implies that she is more in love with his renown than with his person. Having already decided by dint of circumstance that he will not oppose the marriage, the Duke then considers the issue of whether Othello's bride should travel with him to the front. The Venetian ruler abdicates his decision-making authority and leaves the matter in Desdemona's hands, asking her what she wishes to do. To this, Desdemona says, "That I (did) love the Moor to live with him/My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,/May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdu'd/Even to the very quality of my lord./I saw Othello's visage in his mind/And to his honors and his valiant parts/Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (I, iii, ll.248–254). Desdemona claims to have gotten inside Othello's psyche and to have fused her soul with his in a spiritual ceremony over which she has officiated in deliberate opposition to the world at large. The Duke accepts all this without inquiry and allows Desdemona to follow Othello to Cyprus even though Turkish fleet continues to threaten the island.

Desdemona and Othello spend their honeymoon in the war zone of Cyprus, and the intimacy between the martial and the marital is underscored by the Moor's first order as the outpost's governor, Othello calling for a celebration of both victory over the Turks and his marriage. Upon their reunion, Othello instinctively taps into the bond that ties Desdemona to him, addressing his wife as "my fair warrior!" (II, i., l.182). This, in turn, highlights the girl's motivation in marrying Othello as one of sharing in his self-made glory and the power that this has conferred upon him.

"Our general's wife is now the general" (II, iii. 1.315), Iago says to Cassio as he steers him toward petitioning Othello for leniency through Desdemona's good offices. In the midst of the corruption scene, Desdemona is confident of her ability to restore Cassio to his position, assuring the crest-fallen Lieutenant, "Do not doubt Cassio,/But I will have my lord and you again/As friendly as you were" (III, iii, 11.4–6). She claims, then, to know how to work her husband to her will and even sets forth a strategy of attrition, telling Cassio that she will not let husband rest until he grants her petition on his behalf: "I'll intermingle everything he does/With Cassio's suit" (III, iii, 11.25–26). Desdemona takes it upon herself to overlook Cassio's dereliction and her confidence in pursuing his suit with her husband is confirmed when Othello says that he "I will deny thee nothing" (1.76).

In the end, Desdemona is innocent of the proximate charges against her, but while she has not been unfaithful to her husband, she has gone well beyond the role of a wife into that of a partner in a single identity based upon heroic fame and political power. Her desire to be associated with Othello in this deep and unnatural manner has moved Desdemona into a position in which she is vulnerable to the victimization that she eventually receives. Thus, her protestations of being guiltless at the hour of her death are technically true but spiritually suspect.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Why Does Othello Change His Mind About Desdemona's Fidelity?**

Essay examining Othello's changing view throughout the play on Desdemona's fidelity — discusses the famous corruption scene and Othello's character.

Until the mid-point of Othello, the title character comports himself in a dignified manner and expresses unbounded faith in the transcendent love that he shares with Desdemona, a bond that reaches over differences in race, age, and social status. Nevertheless, Othello begins to change his mind about his young wife in the corruption scene of Act III (scene iii) and by the start of Act IV he literally collapses at Iago's feet in a babbling trance. From this point forward, Othello is completely preoccupied with the mission of avenging himself on Desdemona and Cassio for an adulterous affair of which they are entirely innocent. The proximate cause of Othello's change of heart is the poisonous deceptions that Iago pours into his ear. But Othello's insecurity about his marriage is rooted deeper than Iago's machinations. Upon realizing that he has been deceived by the honest Iago, Othello loses his sense of self, his identity, and refers to himself as "he that was Othello" (V, ii, 1.285). It is not the power of Iago's magic that transforms Othello into a jealous, raging beast, but the Moor's own shortcomings masked by his role as the military hero of Venetian society, a status that is subject to sudden reversal.

Long before he so quickly succumbs to Iago's treachery in the corruption scene, Othello displays fatal chinks in the armor of his social identity. Othello exhibits an unlimited self-confidence in his civic role, asserting that his name can "out-tongue" Brabantio's complaint to the Duke. But when we compare the two characters, we realize that the Moor is actually insecure about his identity in Venetian society and uncertain about its ways. As a representative of the Venetian aristocracy's old guard, Brabantio naturally looks askance on the credibility and the motives of those beneath him. Hence, he actively challenges and insults the reports of his daughter's elopement with Othello as they are relayed to him from the street by Iago and Roderigo in Act I, scene i. This stands in sharp contrast to Othello, who is all too willing to believe the word of his subordinates and whose status in Venice is not a matter of hereditary class but of military prowess. Othello takes his cues about the marital customs of Venice from others being an outsider who must rely upon feedback from native Venetians to operate within that culture.



This feedback, however, is cut off when Othello moves to Cyprus, an island that is beyond the scope of Venice's (corrupted) values and placed under the full control of the Moor, a man who has no experience in governance. The two orders that he gives in his capacity as governor, to jointly celebrate his victory over the Turks and his recent marriage and to Desdemona (Act II, scene ii) and his inspection of the island's fortifications (Act III, scene ii) are those of a military commander rather than a civil authority. On Cyprus, Othello is all-powerful but he is deprived of signals about the meaning of events in Venetian culture.

In the corruption scene (III, iii), after first advising Othello to look to Desdemona and Cassio, Iago reminds him of Brabantio's lot and words: "She did deceive her father, marrying you;/And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks/She loved them most" (III, iii, ll.207–209). In his highly uncritical manner, Othello readily assents to this, saying "And so she did" (III, iii, l.210). Iago then expresses a disingenuous empathy toward Brabantio: "She that so young could give out such seeming/To seal her father's eyes up close as oak/He thought 'twas witchcraft" (III, iii, ll.211–213). As middle-aged husband who has a quasi-paternal relation to his wife, the memory of Desdemona's betrayal of Brabantio plainly taps into the suspicions and insecurities of Othello. Not only is Iago his primary source of (false) reports about Cassio and Desdemona, Iago is his sole guide as to what these events mean within the cultural framework of Venetian society.

Looking back we find that as a general, Othello is accustomed to assessing the meaning of a situation and making a decision based solely on his own judgment. Once that decision is made, Othello pursues its logical consequences. Outside of the military sphere, however, Othello is not able to appraise the meaning of situations and must rely upon others to lead him to it, most notably Iago. Once they have done so, however, Othello is committed to a course of action from which he cannot veer. Although, Desdemona provides him with a highly plausible explanation for the loss of the handkerchief, Othello, a man of action who lacks critical faculties, does not pause to consider this alternative account of how the handkerchief came into Cassio's possession and what his possession of the item actually means. Iago works his designs upon Othello and is the active agent behind the Moor's jealousy, but the long-standing defects of Othello's social identity are essential to the villain's machinations.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **The Women of Othello**

Essay examining the roles of the three primary female characters in Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, and the relationships between the three.

Shakespeare's Othello presents us with a male world in which women have an especially rough time. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca are all rejected by their respective partners, and all three love their men unselfishly and unreservedly, even when confronted by behaviour that we would deem grounds for divorce at the very least. All the women are engaged in unbalanced partnerships: they feel more for their self-centred men than the men are capable of reciprocating. However, the women also display genuine emotions toward each other that is not reflected in any of the male-male relationships.

Emilia and Desdemona are both wives to men that have made the military their lives. Desdemona is the new wife, innocent and inexperienced in the ways of the world despite being raised in one of the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan of the Italian city-states, Venice. By contrast, Emilia has been married for some time. She is wise to the habits of soldiers, yet she will believe only so much of what her husband tells her. Although Emilia has been with Desdemona since the first Act, we do not get an intimate view of her psychology or her relationship with Desdemona until the Willow Scene in Act Four.

During this scene, Emilia shows genuine concern for Desdemona and the problem she is having with Othello. Desdemona tells her that even when Othello is angry with her, she still finds 'grace and favour' (4.3.19) in his looks. She adds that if she should die before Emilia, Emilia should wrap her body in the wedding sheets now on the bed. Of course, Emilia thinks this is only a bit of girl-talk, but Desdemona continues to tell her about a song she has learned from her mother's maid, the Willow Song. This is a moment of intense personal inter-reaction between the two women. Emilia is unpinning Desdemona hair and her dressing gown, preparing the girl for bed as if she were a surrogate mother. Such tenderness and tactile expressions of affection are a strictly female domain in this play. It is the men, not the women, who perpetrate the violence.

The conversation maintains this tender, maternal tone through to the end of the scene, but it is most noticeable when Desdemona exclaims, 'O these men, these men!' (4.3.59). Desdemona cannot believe that women cheat on their husbands and asks Emilia, 'Wouldst thou do such a thing for all the world?' (4.3.67). Although she tries to offer a light-hearted answer, Emilia knows full well that Desdemona's view of love is a romantic view and hence, it is not a laughing matter. What follows in blank verse is not unusual for Shakespeare. Emilia speaks for female equality, as Shakespeare's heroines often do. Knowing that both her fate and that of Desdemona are tied up in that of their husbands in social and financial terms, Emilia appeals to the intangible qualities that lie just beyond her grasp: fidelity in love and sensitivity to women's feelings. According to Emilia, if women do not get these things from their partners, then their partners cannot be surprised when women behave as they do.

In effect Emilia is asking for relief from the double standard, echoing Ophelia's advice to her brother Laertes when he leaves for France in *Hamlet*. However, Emilia does so completely aware of the implications for her and her mistress. Both women are away from home without support systems and without status or financial security. There is little likelihood that they can survive without their husbands, despite being ill-treated. Their only consolation is confiding in each other, a luxury that does not exist for Bianca, the third woman.

Bianca is a courtesan who has travelled, like Desdemona, from Venice to Cyprus to be with Cassio. Venetian courtesans were famous throughout Europe for the richness and style with which they conducted themselves. So refined were they that occasionally they would be mistaken for noble wives. Therefore, in a sense, there would be no discernable visual difference between Desdemona and Bianca, whose very name implies purity. Although Hollywood is often credited with the creation of the 'good-hearted bad girl', Shakespeare created Bianca centuries before.

Like Emilia, Bianca is worldly and will love Cassio without reservation. Yet she has a clear definition of who she is and what place she holds in this male-oriented society. After Iago kills Roderigo, Iago attempts to implicate Bianca to the attack, probably brought about by a fit of jealousy when he went to have dinner with her. Because Cassio is wounded, Bianca is understandably upset, but she replies angrily to Emilia's calling her a 'strumpet':

I am no strumpet  
But of life as honest as you that thus  
Abuse me. (5.1.122–124)

In a sense, Bianca is in fact more honest than Emilia whose lie to Desdemona about the handkerchief provides the catalyst for her murder. In any event, Bianca is definitely more truthful than the 'honest Iago' who accuses her.

Bianca is also more sexually honest. Her relationship with Cassio is based on their mutual knowledge that they are uncommitted to each other and nothing more will come of their liaison. Cassio does not confide to Bianca that he has been dismissed as Othello's lieutenant, nor does he tell her the owner of the handkerchief when he knows very well that Desdemona kept it 'evermore about her/To kiss and to talk to' (3.3.299–300).

When he asks her to copy the handkerchief's strawberry design, he quickly tries to get her to leave so that Othello will not him with her. This request may be Cassio's attempt to protect what is left of his shattered reputation since, according to Iago, Cassio is married, 'almost damned in a fair wife' (1.1.20). Whatever Cassio's motives may be, Bianca does not object very strongly since she knows what the rules are for the game she and Cassio are playing. She is willing to compromise for a bit of his time. Or so it seems.

Iago says that Bianca is

A housewife that by selling her desires  
Buys herself bread and clothes; it is a creature  
That dotes on Cassio (4.1.95–97).

We already know Iago to be unreliable, but yet we must question if Bianca has been driven to prostitution to survive. Would this be the fate of Desdemona and Emilia should they decide to leave their abusive husbands? In addition, the conversation between Iago and Cassio that follows not only leads Othello to think that Desdemona is unfaithful with Cassio, but also shows that Cassio has no respect for Bianca. In front of his friends, Cassio is not married, but does not want to be associated with Bianca and he treats her so. When she comes to return the handkerchief, Bianca tells Cassio in no uncertain terms that she will have nothing to do with it (4.1.147–158).

It is here that as Othello becomes convinced of Desdemona's guilt, Bianca is linked to her. Bianca and Desdemona could quite possibly be taken as Venetian noble women, but their men treat them like sub-humans. These men will not allow escape from the label 'prostitute'. In a way, Desdemona has prostituted herself in her relationship with Othello. Like a prostitute, Desdemona has provided Othello with a pleasant diversion from his activities as a soldier. Like Bianca, she has followed him from Venice to Cyprus, refusing to stay home like other wives. Unlike a prostitute, however, Desdemona has refused to face the sexual problems she and Othello have had since their marriage began, and, unlike Bianca, Desdemona has not been 'honest' with Othello, has not confronted him about real issues.

It is no wonder, then, that these three women face a bleak future: two die, one simply fades. However, before that happens, Shakespeare presents us with images of strong, non-stereo-typical individuals who exhibit extraordinary goodness without compromising their moral strength — real women.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Geography in Othello

Essay examining the role of geography in Othello, including the comparison Shakespeare presents between Venice and Cyprus.

While the focus of Shakespeare's Othello is often on the domestic conflict of Othello and Desdemona, these events are purposefully fixed in specific geographic locations: Venice and Cyprus. Shakespeare creates a comparison of Venice with Cyprus that permeates the play, and the influence that geography has on the play can be vital to understanding why the plot progresses the way it does.

The comparison begins, oddly enough, with the title of the play, The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice. 'Othello' as a name is neither Italian (which would be 'Otello') or Moorish. In addition, while Othello could possibly be 'the Moor of Venice', the title does not identify him as the only Moor from Venice. It fixes him through geographical identification as a definite part of Venice, not as a native Venetian, but as a stranger in

and of the city. Othello has adopted Venice as his city, their Christian code of behaviour as his code, his marriage to a white woman as his bond to this place. Nonetheless, Othello does not 'belong' to this culture, nor can he ever be considered a Venetian. Interestingly, the nationalism of the Venetians surfaces during Iago's opening comments about Cassio. Cassio is a Florentine, a fact that Iago takes as extremely distasteful. The comments cause us to wonder that if Iago can so hate a fellow Italian, then his antipathy towards a Moor is indeed frightening.

The play opens in Venice, one of the most powerful city-states of 16th century Italy. Located in the northwest corner of the country on the Adriatic Sea, Venice was a thriving port and a very important exchange point for goods between Europe, north Africa, and the Near and Far East. It is without a doubt a formidable naval power to be called in to protect an island some distance away. In addition to trade, Venice was noted for the pleasures it offered travellers in the way of arts, music, and freely available sex. From Shakespeare's point of view, Venice was part of his own familiar world (the West), a world that did not include Cyprus (the East).

Venice's government is headed by a Duke and a council (or senate) comprised of nobles and wealthy merchants who brought their complaints and their squabbles to the Duke for resolution. The Duke's double function as leader and judge is succinctly presented in 1.3, where Brabantio, Desdemona's father, presents his charges against Othello while the Duke is commissioning Othello to fight the Turks.

Furthermore, Venice is a city within certain, clearly defined boundaries (city walls). As long as Othello and Desdemona remain within these walls, their marriage will be influenced by the culture within. As the action of the play breaks these boundaries and move to Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean, the relationship of this couple will reflect the upheaval such a move brings, only so intensely that neither can survive. The dislocation of Venetian culture from West to East will ultimately prove to have tragic consequences for all the participants in the move. Geographically, they are moving away from the closed structure of Venice to a more open structure of society, and where the rules will change.

Although the play emphasises Cyprus' role by mentioning it more than twenty-four times, it does not give many details about the place. According to widely known legend, Venus (Aphrodite) rose from the sea near Cyprus' west coast, earning it the designation as the island of Venus. Shakespeare mentions the birthplace of Venus in *Venus and Adonis* (line 1193) and in *The Tempest* (4.1.93), but there is no mention of the goddess in *Othello*. This omission, therefore, focuses our attention not on love as personified in the Goddess of Love, but on love as a human frailty having more to do with human deception than divine intervention. Such a view is reflective of the humanist concerns of the late Renaissance.

Shakespeare could not have known that eventually in 1669 the Turks would invade Cyprus, forcing the Venetians to withdraw and effectively ending their role as a major naval force. What Shakespeare does do, however, is clearly establish Cyprus as an alternative to Venice. For Shakespeare's audience, Cyprus, as well as Barbary, Egypt, Rhodes, and Aleppo among others, would have defined a foreign, strange, exotic place about which they could only dream. With no frame of reference in their every day lives for these places, just the names would make the events of the play very plausible. The persistent mention of other foreign places contextualises Cyprus as the mid-way point between civilisation and barbarism, a point made flesh in the character of Othello. Furthermore, unlike Venice, militarism is the stable mechanism of the behavioural code. Cassio is dealt with according to this code, as is Iago, and it is the Venetian nobles who see to its implementation. Most notable is the lack of any Cypriots in the play while everyone is in Cyprus. It is as if they have all travelled to a different planet.

This Cyprus, however, is different in that it is under the protection of Venice. It is almost an Italian colony, but it is not essentially an appendage to Venetian culture. Although it does hold to a Christian code for the behaviour of its residents, it remains a place of extreme violence and the almost constant breaking of that code by the Venetians who have become the outsiders.

The government is by a governor appointed by the Duke, and the Turks (also foreigners) threaten Cyprus with invasion. This incursion of non-Christian into Christian space will not be tolerated, regardless of Venice's hypocritical stance. In Venice we see how business and other matters are conducted within city walls. In the relatively open spaces of Cyprus, things change. Othello is not so foreign in this environment nor is he totally secure. It can be argued persuasively that being in the open spaces of Cyprus allows Othello's insecurities to surface, insecurities about himself and Desdemona that he had successfully suppressed in Venice.

This viewpoint may be justified when we consider the effect of geographical change on Othello and Desdemona's marriage. In Venice, they secretly eloped, and the council, despite Brabantio's passionate pleading, retains its focus on political events. Once in Cyprus with the war finished before it began, the focus reverts to Othello and Desdemona, and political events are reduced to a series of inspections and state banquets.

Shakespeare's audience could have readily believed Othello capable of such intense passion because they held that the Four Humours (those bodily fluids that sustained the body) were influenced by the weather. The warm climate of Italy was supposed to render the blood warm with desire (much like the effect of Italian wine), and Italians were notorious for being 'hot-blooded'. How much more would the warmth of Cyprus affect Othello!

Also to be considered is Venice's reputation as a sexual paradise where courtesans were the normal marital addition. When Iago hints to Othello about Desdemona's infidelity, it would not be thought unusual for Othello to arrive at a perfectly reasonable (though erroneous) conclusion:

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice  
That married with Othello (4.2.91–92).

The entire geography of the play and its blatant breaks in locale serve not only to gloss the dissolution of Othello and Desdemona's marital problems, but also the 'otherness' of the two lovers. Othello has no place in Desdemona's world, no matter how many victories he wins, no matter how much he is trusted by the Duke, no matter how assimilated he thinks he may be. Alternatively, Desdemona can never be part of Othello's world: she does not understand the demands of a soldier's life; she only has Othello's version of his military exploits; she has been raised in the shelter of Venice. Desdemona has been insulated from the man's world that is Venice, and is now isolated by Cyprus. Although she has the dreams and hopes normal for a young newlywed, she is, in the eyes of the men, a property for barter. Failing to recognise this about herself leads Desdemona to other serious misjudgements about men, their motives, and their tenacity. The play begins in Venice, moves to Cyprus, and ends with a return to Venice by Montano. Yet it would be unfair to assume that this geography imposes itself on the play to the exclusion of the other motifs. The geography is the canvas on which Shakespeare will fashion an absorbing tale, and it stays there, in the background, supporting, colouring, and subtly influencing our interpretations.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Opposites Attract: Othello and Desdemona**

Essay examining the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

Frequently drama teachers ill explain to their students that the essence of drama is conflict. In Shakespeare's Othello, conflict on the social and political levels are an essential part of the story. Yet within the relationship of Othello and Desdemona, one that should be conflict-free, we find the most important and the deepest rifts. The difference that has received the most attention in recent years is their interracial marriage. During the trial

of O. J. Simpson, media used the play as a comparison. But there are other factors at work in their relationship that go beyond racial difference, for example, age, experience of life, and a lack of knowledge about sex, love, and each other. The convention of an older man in love with a much younger love interest had been a staple of comedy since the days of Aristophanes, and had survived through much English literature, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for instance. Shakespeare, however, takes the theme and twists it, affixing it as tragic motif to this mismatched couple.

In the play's opening act, Othello relates how he and Desdemona began their relationship. Brabantio had invited Othello to his house and during those visits, Othello told stories

of most disastrous chances, Of moving accidents by flood and field  
Of hair-breadth 'scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach  
Of being taken by the insolent foe And sold to slavery; of my  
redemption thence And portance in my travailous history (1.3.135–140)

and other marvellous adventures. A young, motherless girl in charge of her father's household must have been impressed by this man who had lived such a risky, exciting life outside Venice. In addition to be physically different from 'the wealthy, curled darlings' (1.2.68) that made up her social circle, Othello is older than Desdemona and undoubtedly a father figure for her. It would not be unreasonable for her to feel the security she had with her father with this man. It is perhaps this comfort that allows Desdemona to declare her love for Othello because of 'the dangers I had passed' (1.3.168). Logically, an experienced general like Othello should have known better than to mistake hero worship for true love, but possibly because he had denied himself a meaningful and committed relationship to pursue his military career, he was more than susceptible to Desdemona's pure and sincere emotion.

The difference in their ages means that there are significant differences in their backgrounds. Desdemona's mother has died and is now a vague memory. As the daughter of a wealthy merchant, Desdemona would have had a very protected upbringing, and she would have been taught how to be a good and dutiful wife to a man of her father's choosing. Her father would have negotiated this marriage for her and she would have been escorted to many feasts and banquets. In this sense, Desdemona has been prepared to handle the social occasions that Othello's position in Cyprus requires. It is an indication of Brabantio's lack of consideration of Othello as a marriage prospect that he allows Othello to spend so much time with Desdemona.

Her elopement, however, without her father's consent or consultation, underscores Desdemona's impetuosity and propensity to act without regard for the consequences wither to herself or those around her. This behaviour does not correct itself after her marriage. In Cassio's suit she is relentless to the point of annoyance. On the other hand, Othello is a career soldier. He has worked hard and suffered much discomfort to reach the rank and status of general. In this leadership position, he is unaccustomed to challenges to his authority. Such a practice in the army would lead to chaos. As long as Desdemona sits adoringly at his feet and hangs on every word of his stories, offering tears as a compassionate reaction, Othello is not threatened. Her insistence to the Duke that she accompany Othello to Cyprus contradicts Othello's request that she be cared for and given companionship fit for her social position. This will be the first of many such challenges that Othello is unequipped to deal with. Othello knows first-hand the horror and physical difficulty of war; Desdemona negates this opinion by inserting herself, again without thought, into Othello's mission.

Desdemona arrives in Cyprus before Othello and engages in a childish and dangerous game of double entendre with Iago, behaviour entirely inappropriate for the wife of an arriving general, but especially in public. Here Desdemona further corrects Othello's 'unknown fate' to 'the heavens' (2.1.191–192). This is a small, irksome thing, but in this play, it is the little things that have greatest consequence.

When she first confronts Othello about Cassio's dismissal, she says she is just being an interested wife. Othello cannot hide his aggravation at her seeking his reversal of an irrevocable public order: 'never more be officer of mine' (2.3.245). Yet Othello will not come out directly and tell Desdemona that she is out of line.

He pretends to have a headache. She begins to give him unsolicited aid with her handkerchief. The loss of the handkerchief at Othello's rejection of her help is much less important to either of them than the challenge that Desdemona keeps throwing at Othello's authority.

When Desdemona persists in Cassio's cause, a frustrated Othello reverts to non-verbal violence since he cannot summon the language he feels he needs to stop her youthful exuberance. Finally realising that Othello is upset, but failing to understand or recognise her part in it, she becomes the docile and submissive girl she had been at the beginning of the relationship. But it is too late. Othello's reason has been poisoned by the one person who, he thinks, knows and understands him — Iago. When in the final scene Desdemona protest her innocence, there is no reason why Othello should believe her because she has pursued all her other challenges with the same fervour. This is one head-to-head challenge that Othello intends to win.

Both Othello and Desdemona suffer from a common trait which paradoxically leads them to confrontation: a lack of knowledge of sex, love, and each other. Both are surrounded by sex in the play. Iago speaks of it in several contexts; Cassio frequents Bianca's house of prostitution. Yet Othello and Desdemona speak of love, not sex. Desdemona is in love with love, and Othello defines love as that amity and fraternity among soldiers. This view would explain his violent reaction to Iago's story about sleeping with Cassio, and Cassio's dream. Both Othello and Desdemona are hoping for a mating of their souls that will fulfil the great fantasy of romantic love: lasting through eternity. Othello's 'love' has as its extreme antidote violent hate which clearly is the result if his loving Desdemona because she pitied his past trials. Othello feels he is justified in his violent actions as a soldier would, but Desdemona is willing to die for love and take the full blame for the breakdown of the marriage, a romantic notion.

The communication, if it ever existed, has irretrievably broken down because neither knows the other as well as they should. They only know, and seem to only want to know, the idealised person they have created, and they hold on to that vision to the exclusion of the reality. Desdemona does not remain the dutiful, obedient daughter once she marries, nor is she Othello's 'biggest fan'. She seeks to become a partner, an equal sharer in Othello's career. Furthermore, his stories do not come true for her. There are no cannibals, or warriors, or narrow escapes on Cyprus. The Turks are defeated by the weather, not her husband. There is no globetrotting, only an assignment to a Venetian outpost, an island. The world she had seen through his eyes does not materialise. While Desdemona tries to make the transition to role of wife, she is without a role model and can only guess if she is getting it right. She is quietly disillusioned and unable to speak about it to anyone but Emilia.

On Othello's part, Desdemona has shown herself to be the direct opposite of the girl he thought he married. Desdemona apparently does not want to hear any more of his tales of adventure. He is busy with the affairs of state and cannot make an accurate assessment of how she spends her time. When they were in Venice, he was probably well acquainted with her routine. In Cyprus, he is not. Although Desdemona does demonstrate an interest in his work, she does so because she is apparently intent on getting him to reverse himself on an administrative decision that has nothing to do with her.

In a modern climate, Othello and Desdemona would probably be referred to a marriage counsellor. But they seek advice from a married couple who appear to have an understanding. Iago and Emilia's marriage is actually no better because of its longevity. Iago's sudden and deliberate murder of Emilia is by far more violent, more shocking, and more decisive than Othello's smothering of Desdemona. Iago is only protecting himself; Othello is protecting mankind.

Overall it can be said that race was probably the least of the problems facing Othello and Desdemona. Their expectations of marriage coupled with their age and inexperience could only end disastrously.

- » [Back to Section Index](#)
- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## The Use of Humor in Othello

Essay highlighting the conventional comedic elements in Othello, and how these elements appear as a precursor to the tragedy.

By the time *Othello* was produced, Elizabethan theatergoers were accustomed to the conventional elements of comedy and knew what to expect from a comic play: a story of love and courtship with some deceptive twist of plot, all worked out to a happy ending through good fortune and human ingenuity. But in Othello, comedy appears as a precursor to tragedy. It presented the audience with the expected comic conventions gone awry.

Although *Othello* is a tragedy, a miniature comedy is played out until Act II, Scene i, where the reunion of Desdemona and Othello takes place. First we are given the frustrations of Roderigo, who is paying Iago to convince Desdemona that she should love Roderigo. Apparently Roderigo has already failed to do this for himself, so he comes across as a fool. This impression is compounded by the fact that Iago is taking Roderigo's money but doing nothing in return. Next we are given the villain Iago and his own set of frustrations. At this point in the play, the extent of Iago's evil is not known; he appears to be an example of another comedic element familiar to Elizabethan audiences: the Vice, one who caused mischief but was essentially a fool. [FN1] Roderigo and Iago carry their grumblings to Desdemona's house, hoping to cause trouble by telling her father, Brabantio, of her elopement with Othello.

This elopement introduces another set of comic elements. The marriage is considered a mismatch, since there is a vast difference in age, race, and cultural backgrounds between the lovers. Such mismatches were common targets of Elizabethan comedy, with special emphasis put on the image of the cuckolded husband, betrayed because he is too old to satisfy his wife's needs. An additional comic touch is the response of the irate father of the bride, in this case, Brabantio, who flaps hysterically about the street in his nightshirt when he learns of the elopement. He continues his ravings at the emergency meeting of the Senate, where he asks for punishment for Othello. Good fortune comes through, however, in the form of the suspected Turk attack on Cyprus. The Senate finds it more expedient to stand behind Othello in hopes that he will defeat the Turks.

Good fortune comes through again when a storm averts the necessity for battle, destroying the Turks' ships, but leaving Othello's and Desdemona's ships safe so they can reunite in Cyprus.

A happy ending—another comedic requisite—but of course the play does not end here. At this point the mischief begun by Iago starts to flourish, and the play transforms into tragedy.

Shakespeare, who had a series of successful comedies before he mastered tragedy, used the basic romantic comedy structure as a departure point for tragedy in *Othello*. According to critic Susan Snyder:

...traditional comic structures and assumptions operate in several ways to shape tragedy...comedy can become the ground from which, or against which, tragedy develops. By evoking the world where lovers always win, death always loses, and nothing is irrevocable, a dramatist can set up false expectations of a comic resolution so as to reinforce by sharp contrast the movement into tragic inevitability. [FN2]



The general situations set up for comedy turn into tragedy when affected by the unique characteristics of the individuals involved. Thus, for example, while the image of the hysterical father bemoaning his daughter's elopement is humorous, it ceases to be funny when the scene is played out according to Brabantio's personality: he gives up his daughter and soon dies of a broken heart.

This transformation into tragedy is especially true with the character of Othello. While he is set up in a traditionally comedic situation, he brings about tragedy by refusing to fit himself into that mold. He recognizes that the cuckolded husband is an object of ridicule:

but, alas, to make me  
the fixed figure for the time of scorn  
To point his slow unmoving finger at!  
Act IV, Scene ii, 53–55

but he chooses to reject such a role. As a result, what could have been played out as humor is transformed into tragedy when he murders Desdemona.

Iago, who through his diabolical manipulations of the characters is at the heart of the transformation of the comic structure into tragedy, ironically is the source of most of the humor in the play. In this way, he fits the part of the traditional Vice, a bawdy mischief-maker who used foul language but generally did no real damage and was always shown to be the fool in the end.

Much of Iago's humor works on two levels: to provide comic entertainment in itself and to give ironic commentaries on the plot. We first see Iago in this role in Act I, Scene i, where he uses racial slurs to taunt Brabantio about Desdemona's elopement:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
is tupping your white ewe.  
(88–9)  
You'll have your daughter covered  
with a Barbary horse;  
you'll have your nephews neigh to you;  
You'll have coursers for cousins and  
gennets for germans. (110–115)

Racism is not the least of Iago's comedic repertoire; he also has a collection of sexist barbs, as witnessed in Act II, Scene i, when Cassio kissing Emilia's hand starts Iago on a general defamation of the female sex. His jests, probably shared by the audience, work to entertain the crowd while giving insight into his feelings toward women. His scheme for revenge against Othello is based on the sexist attitude that women are fickle.

Iago plays the clown in other parts of the drama, singing comic songs at the party where he gets Cassio drunk, making fun of Othello chastising the soldiers in the same scene. In fact, Iago seems to be the only character who enjoys himself in the play. But unlike the traditional clown in comedy, Iago is not just a low-life entertainer; he is an adept manipulator who succeeds in directing the course of the tragedy toward his own ends.

Iago's comedic talents include the use of deadpan humor, as he shows on at least two occasions. In Act II, Scene iii, when Cassio cannot remember what happened while he was drunk, Iago exclaims with a straight face, "Is't possible?" (286) He uses the same line later in Act III, Scene iii, after Othello's speech about giving up his profession. This sarcastic humor in the face of other people's misery highlights Iago's cruelty.

To have the main source of humor be the main source of evil in the play sets up an interesting conflict within the audience. On one hand, as Iago's cruelty sends the story irrevocably toward tragedy, the audience must be developing hatred for him. However, as they laugh at his humor, especially that which is directed toward the people he is helping to destroy, they are in danger of becoming complicit in his evil.

The final comedic element discussed here is the use of the Clown, another tradition in Elizabethan theater. The Clown seems to perform two functions generally in theater. His puns and burlesque antics were designed to appeal to the "lower classes" in the audience who would not pick up on the more subtle forms of comedy directed to the literate audience. Also the Clown passes through the play immediately after times of emotional torment, providing "comic relief," a chance for the audience to rest and gear up emotionally for the next scene. The Clown appears twice in *Othello* but has very little to offer. His first appearance is in Act III, Scene i, when he taunts the musicians Cassio has hired to play for Othello. After a few word plays, he tells them that Othello only likes music that cannot be heard, and sends them on their way. (One source has said that this scene is in fact so lacking in humor that modern productions often leave it out entirely.) The Clown's second part is even briefer, when he plays on words with Desdemona. The Clown seems out of place in this play, as though he has walked onto the wrong set and can't find a part for himself.

It seems that the only humor that works in the play is intimately tied up with the tragedy, from the misdirecting of the traditional elements of romantic comedy into tragedy, to the major source of humor being the major source of evil. As critic Edward Dowden has written, the humor in *Othello* "is the grin of a death's head, the mirth of a ghoul." [FN3]

## NOTES

1. The concept of Iago as Vice is developed later in this essay.
2. Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979) p. 5
3. Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare, His Mind and Art*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967) p. 240.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Charlton, H.B., *Shakespearean Comedy*, London: Methuen & Co., 1938.

Coles, Blanche, *Shakespeare's Four Giants*, Rindge, New Hampshire: Richard Smith Publisher, 1957.

Dowden, Edward, *Shakespeare — His Mind and Art*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967.

Gordon, George, *Shakespearean Comedy*, London: Oxford University Press, 1944.

McFarland, Thomas, *Tragic Meanings in Shakespeare*, New York: Random House, 1966.

Snyder, Susan, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## "The Cause" in Shakespeare's *Othello*

Essay examining the causes or motivations of the main characters' actions in *Othello*.

In a discussion of the causes or motivations of the play, it is helpful to understand the primary motifs of the great tragedies. Shakespeare emphasized the problems of good and evil, sin and redemption. He was not

particularly interested in the public sides of people, but whether they were good people inside. This can be easily seen in Othello, for all the action revolves around successful deception. Even Othello, a basically noble and honest public figure, shows an irrational and violent side to his nature at the end.

Shakespeare seemed interested in how the characters responded to certain situations. He believed that the action of tragedy occurred in the soul. The characters in this play are sensitive: morally, philosophically, and aesthetically. They all have imaginative consciences, and are able to step out of their situation and reflect on their behaviors. They realize they are involved in a moral structure and must evaluate. They are engaging in this evaluative process when they speak about their causes, reasons, explanations, rationalizations or motivations in the play.

In Othello there is metaphysical poisoning going on. Minds and characters are being destroyed and corrupted with the poison of jealousy – what Shakespeare refers to as "the green-eyed monster". Iago is jealous of Cassio's new promotion, and vows to seek revenge on Othello for granting it to him. Iago uses the natural jealousy between men and women, and gives Othello a very bitter pill – one that threatens his pride and his manhood. When a person's pride is severely threatened, they can be driven into desperation and will do irrational and harmful actions. The use of the theme of jealousy places characters in situations where they must respond to it. Each character shows a different response, and each response determines what happens to each character.

Othello is completely naive about his relationships with women. As for love, he is stupid and good-hearted, and falls head over heels in it, unthinkingly. Unfortunately, he falls "out of love" just as quickly and thinks with his heart instead of his head. When he runs into trouble he never meets it head-on, but allows it to ferment and rot his character.

It is his hurt pride that eventually causes his downfall, but he doesn't see it as such. Othello believes himself to be a rational person who judges situations based on facts. He does not see himself as one who could be deceived, and falls right into Iago's trap. Even when jealousy infects him beyond all reason he believes he is acting reasonably – when he kills Desdemona. He rationalizes that his killing her is a duty. The "cause" is Desdemona's alleged infidelity, but he is not possessed by a jealous rage when he does his deed. He convinces himself that he must do his duty and kill her so that she won't betray other men.

Othello's major error which leads to his downfall was believing himself to be a logical, rational, duty-driven man, above the jealous passions of ordinary men. He means to act righteously, but abandons his reasoning abilities. His interpretation of his "cause" is wrong. The cause is his damaged pride.

Iago is a cynic, and believes that people are evil like himself. He is realistic, and able to detect what motivates each person. He is evil and malicious, and will stop at nothing to avenge himself. Yet, he does not deceive himself as to his primary motivations and causes. His injured pride and his jealousy is the prime motivation for ensuing actions.

He expected to get the title of "lieutenant", and probably deserved it. Othello's passing him up was the motivation for Iago's hatred of Othello and his jealousy toward Cassio.

Iago also has the insight to state that "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (I.iii.389). Besides the pleasure of revenge, he has the passion for financial gain and is under the control of money. He isn't deceiving himself on this point. His "cause" (I.iii. 373) or causes are his hatred of Othello, his envy of Othello's power, and his desire for Roderigo's wealth.

Yet Iago is not completely incapable of deceiving himself. He is able to convince himself that Othello has also seduced his wife. Although there is no justification for this, he accuses Othello of this offense to further fuel his hatred of him and justify destroying him. Also, Iago asks how anyone could call him a villain (II.iii. 354) to counsel Cassio and Desdemona in his particular way. He really can't be seriously questioning this charge.

Cassio is a good and honest man, and is not deceiving himself when he tells Othello, "Dear General, I never gave you cause" (V.ii.295). Cassio is a gentleman and is knowledgeable in the matters of the world. When it comes to sex he knows how to handle himself. He went to Bianca when he wanted sex, and always treated Desdemona with great respect. His particular weakness was not with women but with liquor. Except when drunk, he is in control of his thoughts and actions. He is rewarded by Shakespeare for his clear thinking and rationality, for he is still alive at the end of the play while others with extreme views die.

However, Cassio does lose Othello's favor and is stripped of his rank because he doesn't see his inability to control his drinking as a weakness.

Desdemona surely gave Othello no reason to suspect her loyalty and devotion to him. Her loyalty was proven over and over again, when she chose Othello over her father, when she spoke up for Othello, in her conduct with Cassio, and her placing the blame for her death on herself at the end. She, though, is irrationally, insanely in love with Othello. When something goes wrong she doesn't know what to do but has the tendency to over look the symptoms. Her main problem is blind love. She is also blind to Iago's faults and continually sees him as an honest man.

Desdemona is also the victim of bad timing and poor planning. She allows Cassio to persuade her to speak on his behalf, and she is pressured by him several times to speak to Othello immediately to plead his case. In Act III, scene iii, she mentions Cassio's name to her husband at the worst possible moment, and also refers to Cassio as a suitor. This clearly works against her.

Both Desdemona and Othello used poor judgment and allow themselves to be brainwashed by Iago. Both failed to think for themselves or to use reason in assessing each other's actions. Both acted in extremes and failed to take a more moderate course. Both loved with all their hearts and Othello sought vengeance with all his heart.

Probably the most serious of Othello's faults was his extreme sexual jealousy and inability to recognize it as such. As he even stated himself, he was naive in the ways of the world. Othello could not handle love and sex, and this drove him mad and to suicide. He overestimated his powers of self-control, however, and saw his "cause" as a just and righteous one. He was mistaken. Shakespeare pointed out that sexual jealousy destroys people and illustrates this very well in Othello.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **An Analysis of Four Shakespearean Villains**

R. Moore compares and contrasts four of Shakespeare's most well-known villains: Macbeth, Claudius, Iago, and Edmund.

Shakespeare's plays have been the focus of critical analysis for centuries. Part of the reason that his works are so widely read is that his characterization of both protagonists and antagonists is well developed. In the course of this essay four of Shakespeare's villains will be compared: Macbeth, King Claudius, Iago and Edmund. Finally, some general conclusions will be drawn.

Some Shakespearean critics attempt to justify Macbeth's evil behavior by contending that his actions were forced on him by an external power. However, A. C. Bradley argues that Macbeth was not controlled by the Witches, their "masters," or Hecate. He continues to explain that the prophecies of the Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal.<sup>1</sup>

Bradley states that when Macbeth heard the first prophecies he was not an innocent man. He contends:

Precisely how far his mind was guilty may be a question; but no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophecy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder.<sup>2</sup>

Upon analyzing Macbeth it becomes evident that the natural death of an old man could have fulfilled the prophecy any day. The idea of fulfilling it by murder was Macbeth's idea entirely.<sup>3</sup>

When Macbeth sees the Witches again, after the murders of Duncan and Banquo, a significant change can be detected in his character. They no longer need to seek him out, rather, he seeks them out. "He has committed himself to his course of evil."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike many villains, Macbeth experiences a profound sense of guilt after committing his evil deeds. Bradley states that the "consciousness of guilt is stronger in him than the consciousness of failure." As a result, Macbeth is in a perpetual state of agony and restlessness. "All that is within him does condemn itself for being there."<sup>5</sup>

Macbeth suffers from a distorted sense of logic when he begins his plot against Banquo. He develops a strange idea in his mind that Banquo's murder will not haunt him if the deed is done by other hands. Unfortunately, for Macbeth, this deed haunts him as much as his other, evil actions.

Unlike Macbeth, who feels guilt after committing his crimes, Claudius (a character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) enjoys his sinful life. He commits crime after crime for lust and power. The satisfaction that Claudius receives from his actions is aptly described in one of his lines: "That one can smile . . . and be a villain."<sup>6</sup>

Weilgart notes that Claudius is able to remain benevolent and reasonable "after murdering his brother for crown and wife." He is proudly able to stand up against his avenger, Laertes, by saying: "There's such divinity doth hedge a king, that treason can peep to what it would . . ."<sup>7</sup> While Macbeth tries to justify some of his evil deeds he is not able to maintain the same level of pride and contentment that Claudius does in *Hamlet*.

Bradley asserts that Claudius was not a villain of force, rather, he was a "cut-purse who stole the diadem from a shelf and put it in his pocket." He possessed the inclination of "natures physically weak and morally small towards intrigue and crooked dealing." Although Bradley argues that Claudius showed no cowardice in times of danger, his first thought was always for himself.<sup>8</sup>

Claudius refused to change his thinking even as he is about to die. Bradley concludes:

Nay, his very last words show that he goes to death unchanged: "Oh yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt (=wounded)," he cries, although in half a minute he is dead. That his crime has failed, and that it could do nothing else, never once comes home to him. He thinks he can over-reach Heaven. When he is praying for pardon, he is all the while perfectly determined to keep his crown; and he knows it.<sup>9</sup>

In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents his audience with perhaps his most diabolical of villains: Iago. J. H. E. Brock explains that Iago's evil nature is depicted from the very beginning of the play as he is shown "dipping his fingers into Roderigo's purse, with as great freedom as if it were his own."<sup>10</sup>

Bernard Spivak observes that Iago is completely insensitive to the feelings of other people. Throughout the play he is cruel and indifferent to the sufferings he causes others. A careful analysis of *Othello* reveals that Iago does not effect one generous or thoughtful action.<sup>11</sup>

Iago confesses that his outward behavior is no guide to his real thoughts. This facet of his personality is certainly borne out in his subsequent behavior. Brock contends that Iago must have been "a profound hypocrite to have imposed on his associates and superiors for so long; and he must have been a man of extreme self-control, who never betrayed himself by fear, nervousness, emotion or an unguarded action."<sup>12</sup>

Iago's unscrupulous behavior also becomes apparent as he passes disagreeable and dangerous jobs on to others (i.e. asking Roderigo to provoke Cassio when drunk). Although he is brave on occasion, Iago does not like to take any unnecessary chances when committing evil deeds.<sup>13</sup>

Shakespeare presents Iago as a habitual liar. Brock states that while he plundered Roderigo, he kept him quiet with a series of lies. In addition, his entire plot against Cassio was without foundation. Finally, Iago "invented for Othello's consumption a series of episodes between Desdemona and Cassio which were blatant falsehoods." Without feeling any shame or guilt, Iago creates facts to suit the occasion.<sup>14</sup>

Weilgart believes that interesting distinctions exist among Macbeth, Claudius, and Iago in their reactions to gaining power. Macbeth seems less satisfied after his success than he was before. He committed the deed in order to be king, however, once he assumes this position he seems to have no other goal but "to sleep in spite of thunder." Claudius, on the other hand, enjoys in royal dignity his happiness after killing Hamlet. Finally, Iago seems unchanged after he achieves his goal: Cassio's position. "He goes on and on plotting. There is no satisfaction corresponding to his desire."<sup>15</sup>

Edmund's villainy is a result of his rebellion against the disqualifications of bastardy. Brock explains that Edmund poisoned his father's mind against Edgar "by informing him that he had tried to win him over to a plot to murder him." Edmund claimed that when he refused to participate in the plot Edgar wounded him with a sword. However, while Edmund did have a wound to show his father, he inflicted it on himself. Unfortunately, Gloucester believed his bastard son and outlawed Edgar.<sup>16</sup> Thus, like Iago, Edmund uses lies to achieve his goals.

The evil nature of Edmund's character once again becomes evident as he is taken into the Duke of Cornwall's service. After receiving his new appointment he immediately betrays his father. Gloucester's eyes are put out by Cornwall and Regan, and Edmund is made the Earl of Gloucester.<sup>17</sup>

Brock observes that Edmund manipulates the feelings of others to achieve his ends. When both Regan and Goneril fall in love with him, "he played one sister off against the other and pretended to be devotedly in love with both."<sup>18</sup> Edmund will stop at nothing to gain the power that he thinks is rightfully his.

Toward the end of *Lear*, Edgar challenges Edmund to single combat to answer for his many crimes. When Edmund is mortally wounded he acknowledges "his enormities, and expresses remorse for his brutal action towards Cordelia."<sup>19</sup> In a sense, Edmund can be compared to Macbeth since both characters experience guilt after committing their vicious actions.

Bradley explains that Edmund possessed a lighter and more superficial nature than Iago. "There is nothing in Edmund of Iago's motive-hunting, and very little of any of the secret forces which impelled Iago." However, both characters are adventurers who actively pursued their goals regardless of who is harmed along the way.<sup>20</sup>

While certain similarities undoubtedly exist among the characters discussed above, each pursued their villainous goals in different manners. Perhaps one of the reasons that Shakespeare has remained so popular over the centuries is that audiences are never quite sure how his villains are going to pursue their goals. Shakespeare should certainly be praised for the variety of characters he developed in his plays as well as for the intensity of his plots.

## Footnotes

1. A. C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1904), p. 343.
2. Bradley, p. 344.
3. Bradley, p. 344.
4. Bradley, p. 345.
5. Bradley, pp. 359–360.
6. Wolfgang J. Weilgart, *Shakespeare's Psychognostic Character Evolution and Transformation* (New York; AMS Press, 1952). p. 51.
7. Weilgart, p. 122.
8. Bradley, p. 169.
9. Bradley, p. 171.
10. J. H. E. Brock, *Iago and Some Shakespearean Villains* (New York: AMS Press, 1937), p. 3.
11. Bernard Spivak, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 53–54.
12. Brock, pp. 3–4.
13. Brock, p. 7.
14. Brock, pp. 7–8.
15. Weilgart, p. 117.
16. Brock, p. 46.
17. Brock, pp. 46–47.
18. Brock, p. 47.
19. Brock, p. 47.
20. Bradley, pp. 300–301.

## Bibliography

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1904.

Brock, J. H. E. *Iago and Some Shakespearean Villains*. New York: AMS Press, 1937.

Spivak, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.

Weilgart, Wolfgang J. *Shakespeare's Psychognostic Character Evolution and Transformation*. New York: AMS Press, 1952.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Criticism

1. [Overview](#)
2. [Jealousy](#)
3. [Race](#)
4. [Time](#)
5. [Othello](#)
6. [Iago](#)
7. [Desdemona](#)

### Overview

In this excerpt, A.C. Bradley highlights aspects of *Othello* which reinforce its emotional impact: the rapid acceleration of the plot, the intensity of Othello's jealousy, the passive suffering of Desdemona, and the luck and skill involved in Iago's intrigue.

What is the peculiarity of *Othello*? What is the distinctive impression that it leaves? Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, I would answer, not even excepting *King Lear*, *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation. Evil is displayed before him, not indeed with the profusion found in *King Lear*, but forming, as it were, the soul of a single character, and united with an intellectual superiority so great that he watches its advance fascinated and appalled. He sees it, in itself almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims. He seems to breathe an atmosphere as fateful as that of *King Lear*, but more confined and oppressive, the darkness not of night but of a close-shut murderous room. His imagination is excited to intense activity, but it is the activity of concentration rather than dilation. (pp. 176–77)

*Othello* is not only the most masterly of the tragedies in point of construction, but its method of construction is unusual. And this method, by which the conflict begins late, and advances without appreciable pause and with accelerating speed to the catastrophe, is a main cause of the painful tension just described. To this may be added that, after the conflict has begun, there is very little relief by way of the ridiculous. Henceforward at any rate Iago's humour never raises a smile. The clown is a poor one; we hardly attend to him and quickly forget him; I believe most readers of Shakespeare, if asked whether there is a clown in *Othello*, would answer No.

In the second place, there is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion; and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion, and driven by it to a crime which is also a hideous blunder. Such a passion as ambition, however terrible its results, is not itself ignoble; if we separate it in thought from the conditions which make it guilty, it does not appear despicable; it is not a kind of suffering, its nature is active; and



therefore we can watch its course without shrinking. But jealousy, and especially sexual jealousy, brings with it a sense of shame and humiliation. For this reason it is generally hidden; if we perceive it we ourselves are ashamed and turn our eyes away; and when it is not hidden it commonly stirs contempt as well as pity. Nor is this all. Such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man; and it does this in relation to one of the most intense and also the most ideal of human feelings. What spectacle can be more painful than that of this feeling turned into a tortured mixture of longing and loathing, the 'golden purity' of passion split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness, and he writhing before it but powerless to deny it entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution, and finding relief only in a bestial thirst for blood? This is what we have to witness in one who was indeed 'great of heart' [V. ii. 361] and no less pure and tender than he was great. And this, with what it leads to, the blow to Desdemona, and the scene where she is treated as the inmate of a brothel, a scene far more painful than the murder scene, is another cause of the special effect of this tragedy.

The mere mention of these scenes will remind us painfully of a third cause; and perhaps it is the most potent of all. I mean the suffering of Desdemona. This is, unless I mistake, the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us. For one thing, it is *mere* suffering; and, *ceteris paribus* [other things being equal], that is much worse to witness than suffering that issues in action. Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. And the chief reason of her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. I would not challenge Mr. [Algernon Charles] Swinburne's statement [in his *Study of Shakespeare*] that we *pity* Othello even more than Desdemona; but we watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress. We are never wholly uninfluenced by the feeling that Othello is a man contending with another man; but Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.

Turning from the hero and heroine to the third principal character, we observe (what has often been pointed out) that the action and catastrophe of *Othello* depend largely on intrigue. We must not say more than this. We must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character. Iago's plot is Iago's character in action; and it is built on his knowledge of Othello's character, and could not otherwise have succeeded. Still it remains true that an elaborate plot was necessary to elicit the catastrophe; for Othello was no Leontes [in *The Winter's Tale*], and his was the last nature to engender such jealousy from itself. Accordingly Iago's intrigue occupies a position in the drama for which no parallel can be found in the other tragedies; the only approach, and that a distant one, being the intrigue of Edmund in the secondary plot of *King Lear*. Now in any novel or play, even if the persons rouse little interest and are never in serious danger, a skilfully worked intrigue will excite eager attention and suspense. And where, as in *Othello*, the persons inspire the keenest sympathy and antipathy, and life and death depend on the intrigue, it becomes the source of a tension in which pain almost overpowers pleasure. Nowhere else in Shakespeare do we hold our breath in such anxiety and for so long a time as in the later Acts of *Othello*.

One result of the prominence of the element of intrigue is that *Othello* is less unlike a story of private life than any other of the great tragedies. And this impression is strengthened in further ways. In the other great tragedies the action is placed in a distant period, so that its general significance is perceived through a thin veil which separates the persons from ourselves and our own world. But *Othello* is a drama of modern life; when it first appeared it was a drama almost of contemporary life, for the date of the Turkish attack on Cyprus is 1570. The characters come close to us, and the application of the drama to ourselves (if the phrase may be pardoned) is more immediate than it can be in *Hamlet* or *Lear*. Besides this, their fortunes affect us as those of private individuals more than is possible in any of the later tragedies with the exception of *Timon*. I have not forgotten the Senate, nor Othello's position, nor his service to the State; but his deed and his death have not that influence on the interests of a nation or an empire which serves to idealise, and to remove far from our own sphere, the stories of Hamlet and Macbeth, of Coriolanus and Antony. Indeed he is already superseded at Cyprus when his fate is consummated, and as we leave him no vision rises on us, as in other tragedies, of

peace descending on a distracted land.

The peculiarities so far considered combine with others to produce those feelings of oppression, of confinement to a comparatively narrow world, and of dark fatality, which haunt us in reading *Othello*. In *Macbeth* the fate which works itself out alike in the external conflict and in the hero's soul, is obviously hostile to evil; and the imagination is dilated both by the consciousness of its presence and by the appearance of supernatural agencies. These . . . produce in *Hamlet* a somewhat similar effect, which is increased by the hero's acceptance of the accidents as a providential shaping of his end. *King Lear* is undoubtedly the tragedy which comes nearest to *Othello* in the impression of darkness and fatefulness, and in the absence of direct indications of any guiding power. But in *King Lear*. . . the conflict assumes proportions so vast that the imagination seems, as in [John Milton's] *Paradise Lost*, to traverse spaces wider than the earth. In reading *Othello* the mind is not thus distended. It is more bound down to the spectacle of noble beings caught in toils from which there is no escape; while the prominence of the intrigue diminishes the sense of the dependence of the catastrophe on character, and the part played by accident in this catastrophe accentuates the feeling of fate. This influence of accident is keenly felt in *King Lear* only once, and at the very end of the play. In *Othello*, after the temptation has begun, it is incessant and terrible. The skill of Iago was extraordinary, but so was his good fortune. Again and again a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting of Othello and Cassio, a question which starts to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago's plot and ended his life. In their stead, Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favourable to him, Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon, Bianca arrives precisely when she is wanted to complete Othello's deception and incense his anger into fury. All this and much more seems to us quite natural, so potent is the art of the dramatist; but it confounds us with a feeling, such as we experience in [Sophocles'] *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that for these star-crossed mortals . . . there is no escape from fate, and even with a feeling, absent from that play, that fate has taken sides with villainy. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Othello* should affect us as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* never do, and as *King Lear* does only in slighter measure. On the contrary, it is marvellous that, before the tragedy is over, Shakespeare should have succeeded in toning down this impression into harmony with others more solemn and serene.

But has he wholly succeeded? Or is there a justification for the fact—a fact it certainly is—that some readers, while acknowledging, of course, the immense power of *Othello*, and even admitting that it is dramatically perhaps Shakespeare's greatest triumph, still regard it with a certain distaste, or, at any rate, hardly allow it a place in their minds beside *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*? (pp. 177–83)

To some readers, . . . parts of *Othello* appear shocking or even horrible. They think—if I may formulate their objection—that in these parts Shakespeare has sinned against the canons of art, by representing on the stage a violence or brutality the effect of which is unnecessarily painful and rather sensational than tragic. The passages which thus give offence are probably those already referred to,—that where Othello strikes Desdemona [IV. i. 240], that where he affects to treat her as an inmate of a house of ill-fame [IV. ii. 24–94], and finally the scene of her death.

The issues thus raised ought not to be ignored or impatiently dismissed, but they cannot be decided, it seems to me, by argument. All we can profitably do is to consider narrowly our experience, and to ask ourselves this question: If we feel these objections, do we feel them when we are reading the play with all our force, or only when we are reading it in a half-hearted manner? For, however matters may stand in the former case, in the latter case evidently the fault is ours and not Shakespeare's. And if we try the question thus, I believe we shall find that on the whole the fault is ours. The first, and least important, of the three passages—that of the blow—seems to me the most doubtful. I confess that, do what I will, I cannot reconcile myself with it. It seems certain that the blow is by no means a tap on the shoulder with a roll of paper, as some actors, feeling the repulsiveness of the passage, have made it. It must occur, too, on the open stage. And there is not, I think, a sufficiently overwhelming tragic feeling in the passage to make it bearable. But in the other two scenes the case is different. There, it seems to me, if we fully imagine the inward tragedy in the souls of the persons as

we read, the more obvious and almost physical sensations of pain or horror do not appear in their own likeness, and only serve to intensify the tragic feelings in which they are absorbed. Whether this would be so in the murder-scene if Desdemona had to be imagined as dragged about the open stage (as in some modern performances) may be doubtful; but there is absolutely no warrant in the text for imagining this, and it is also quite clear that the bed where she is stifled was within the curtains, and so, presumably, in part concealed.

Here, then, *Othello* does not appear to be, unless perhaps at one point, open to criticism, though it has more passages than the other three tragedies where, if imagination is not fully exerted, it is shocked or else sensationally excited. If nevertheless we feel it to occupy a place in our minds a little lower than the other three (and I believe this feeling, though not general, is not rare), the reason lies not here but in another characteristic, to which I have already referred,—the comparative confinement of the imaginative atmosphere. *Othello* has not equally with the other three the power of dilating the imagination by vague suggestions of huge universal powers working in the world of individual fate and passion. It is, in a sense, less 'symbolic'. We seem to be aware in it of a certain limitation, a partial suppression of that element in Shakespeare's mind which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians and philosophers, in one or two of his plays, notably in *Troilus and Cressida*, we are almost painfully conscious of this suppression; we feel an intense intellectual activity, but at the same time a certain coldness and hardness, as though some power in his soul, at once the highest and the sweetest, were for a time in abeyance. In other plays, notably in the *Tempest*, we are constantly aware of the presence of this power; and in such cases we seem to be peculiarly near to Shakespeare himself. Now this is so in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and, in a slighter degree, in *Macbeth*; but it is much less so in *Othello*. I do not mean that in *Othello* the suppression is marked, or that, as in *Troilus and Cressida*, it strikes us as due to some unpleasant mood; it seems rather to follow simply from the design of a play on a contemporary and wholly mundane subject. Still it makes a difference of the kind I have attempted to indicate, and it leaves an impression that in *Othello* we are not in contact with the whole of Shakespeare. And it is perhaps significant in this respect that the hero himself strikes us as having, probably, less of the poet's personality in him than many characters far inferior both as dramatic creations and as men. (pp. 183–86)

A. C. Bradley, "Othello," in his *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, second edition, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1905. pp. 175–206.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Jealousy

In this excerpt, D.R. Godfrey examines the portrayal of jealousy in *Othello*, concluding that Iago exhibits "an all-encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations." As a result, envious hatred takes possession of his soul, motivates his actions, and turns him into "the most completely villainous character in all literature."

To proclaim Shakespeare's *Othello* as a tragedy of jealousy is but to echo the opinion of every critic who ever wrote about it. The jealousy not only of Othello, but of such lesser figures as Roderigo and even Bianca is surely self-evident enough to be taken for granted. And yet, though the jealousy of Othello in particular is invariably mentioned and assumed, it cannot be said that any over-riding importance has on the whole been attributed to it. While Othello may deliver judgement on himself as one,

not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme,  
[V. ii. 345–46]

critical opinion has hardly gone beyond admitting that jealousy itself has been a contributing factor, of far less importance, for example, than the diabolical "evidence" manufactured by Iago. Until we are left with the conclusion, or at least implication, that had Othello *not* been jealous, the tragedy would still have occurred. This taking for granted or even belittling of the factor of jealousy in *Othello*, is the more surprising in that Shakespeare through Iago and Emilia has taken pains to identify for our benefit the special nature of jealousy, and to call particular attention to the element of irrationality that accompanies it. Jealousy, warns Iago, in order to awaken it in Othello,

. . . is the green-ey'd monster, which doth mock  
That meat it feeds on,  
[III. iii. 166–671]

And the same essence of irrationality is later confirmed by Emilia when, in response to Desdemona's pathetically rational "Alas the day! I never gave him cause" [III. iv. 158], she bluntly retorts:

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;  
They are not ever jealous for the cause,  
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster,  
Begot upon itself, born on itself.  
[III. iv. 159–62]

The coincidence of view is remarkable, and presumably intentional, and clearly reflects more than the individual judgement of Emilia or Iago. Moreover the truth of the judgement is demonstrated again and again throughout the play wherever jealousy is manifest. The jealous person, whether Othello, Roderigo, Bianca or, as we shall attempt to show, Iago himself, is revealed as one who, from the moment that jealousy strikes, divorces himself or herself from rationality. Jealousy, once awakened, becomes self-perpetuating, self-intensifying, and where no justifying evidence for it exists, the jealous person under the impulse of an extraordinary perversity will continue to manufacture it, inventing causes, converting airy trifles into "confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ," [III. iii. 323–24]. Any attempt, in other words, to interpret jealousy rationally, to look for logic in the mental processes of a jealous person, will be unavailing. For we will be dealing invariably and in at least some measure with a monster, a form of possession, an insanity, (pp. 207–08)

[In his *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley argues] that until Iago leaves him alone to the insinuating thoughts he has planted in him [III. iii. 257] Othello is not jealous at all. However, Othello's immediately ensuing soliloquy clearly indicates how deeply his faith in Desdemona has already been undermined, and though at the sight of her he rallies,

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,  
I'll not believe it,  
[III. iii. 278–79]

recovery is momentary, and when he reappears only minutes later, Iago does not need his "Ha, ha, false to me, to me" [III. iii. 333], to recognize the symptoms of a consuming jealousy that all the drowsy syrups of the world can never alleviate. Othello may appear to be resisting insinuation, to recover from the shock of Iago's "Ha, ha, I like not that" [III. iii. 35], and the sight of Cassio stealing away "so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39], but it is soon evident enough that he has not recovered, that the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity has already invaded his mind. And... as with Leontes [in *The Winter's Tale*], the passage from initial doubt to the madness of absolute certainty, is incredibly rapid. The action of the whole "Temptation Scene" [III. iii], as it is sometimes called, is continuous, perhaps some twentyfive minutes of stage time, and by the end of it Othello is a man utterly possessed, calling out for blood and vengeance, authorizing Iago to murder Cassio, and

resolving "In the due reverence of asacred vow" [III. iii. 461], himself to do the same for Desdemona:

Damn her, lewd minx: O, damn her!  
Come, go with me apart, I will withdraw  
To furnish me with some swift means of death.  
For the fair devil.  
[III. iii. 476–79]

Already present meanwhile in the initial reactions of Othello is of course that most encompassing of all the characteristics of the jealous man, a consuming irrationality. The presence of Iago with his diabolical insinuations tends somewhat to mask the insanity of Othello, to present him as a man reacting logically in the face of accumulating evidence, indeed of proof. By the end of the Temptation Scene, however, there is still no more than the slenderest of evidence, a handkerchief that Iago *may* have seen Cassio wipe his beard with, and Cassio's alleged, and, as Iago himself admits, inconclusive dream. Leontes, only after a considerable interval of time and after sending to the Oracle for confirmation puts Hermione on trial for her life. Othello, however, with nothing but Iago's word to go on, and without even seeking to confront either Desdemona or Cassio, passes sentence of death. Later, it is true, circumstantial evidences multiply: Desdemona's tactless pleading for Cassio, Iago's statement of Cassio's confession, Bianca's returning of the handkerchief to Cassio before Othello's eyes; but it is strangely apparent that Othello's conviction of Desdemona's guilt is *confirmed* rather than established by such "evidences". In the exchanges between Iago and Othello at the beginning of Act IV it is revealed that the handkerchief had become so incidental to his conviction that he had actually forgotten it [IV. i. 10–22]. In the same way, when at length confrontation comes between himself and Emilia and subsequently with Desdemona, it is apparent that no rational enquiry, no seeking out of evidence is to be undertaken. Emilia's indignant denials are met with:

She says enough, yet she's a simple bawd  
That cannot say as much.  
[IV. ii. 20–1]

And Desdemona, assigned the horrible role of a whore in a brothel, is not to be rationally interrogated but rhetorically denounced, on the assumption, of which there is not the slightest sign, that she is fully aware of her guilt. Perhaps in no other scene is the impregnable insanity of Othello so fully evident.

Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidences are certainly there and must be allowed to provide in some measure a logical justification for Othello's "case" against Desdemona. Against that case however must always be set one unanswerable factor the effect of which is to demolish it utterly, the factor of time. With Desdemona dead, Othello can proclaim calmly and positively,

"Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows  
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame  
A thousand times committed,  
[V. ii. 210–12]

Whereas it is obvious to anyone not wholly bereft of reason that the time for one single act of infidelity, let alone a rhetorical thousand, has simply not existed. "What place, what time, what form, what likelihood?" [IV. ii. 138] demands the practical Emilia, and of course the questions are unanswerable.

This very problem of the time factor in *Othello* has been greatly debated. Since Othello and Desdemona left Venice immediately after their marriage, and since Cassio and Desdemona were on different ships, and since but one night had passed on Cyprus, a night that Othello and Desdemona had spent together, when indeed could the thousand adulteries have occurred? And how could the sheer impossibility of Desdemona's multiple

infidelities never have presented itself to Othello's mind? Various familiar explanations have been attempted: that the text as it has come down to us is incomplete and that the indication of an interval of time after the arrival on Cyprus has been lost: that Shakespeare in effect is playing a trick on his audience on the valid assumption that they will not notice the time discrepancy anyway: that Shakespeare deliberately adopted a double time scheme, involving a background of "long time" against a foreground of "short time", the latter to accommodate the inconsistencies in Iago's plot against Othello, and his need to bring it to a speedy conclusion.

The respective merits of these various explanations have been copiously debated. Common to all of them is the reluctance of critics to assume that Iago, a supremely clever man, would ever have allowed his whole plot to depend on Othello's unlikely failure to realise the obvious, namely that the infidelities of which Desdemona stands accused could not have happened because there had been no time for them. Iago, it is argued, would never have taken such a risk; and so we, as well as Othello, are being required to assume that in some way or other time for a thousand shameful acts had in fact existed. I would suggest, however, that we cannot so assume, and are indeed not being asked to do so. For Iago knew, and we should realise, that by the time he felt it safe to proceed from hints and insinuations to firm accusations of infidelity, Othello would no longer be himself, but a quite different person possessed by the eclipsing madness of jealousy. Certainly we must agree that there are two time schemes in *Othello*, a long and a short, but equally each must be seen to operate within its own distinct world: on the one hand the long time world of everyday normality, on the other a short time, indeed a timeless universe, in which jealousy, divorced from reality, through distortion, falsification and sheer invention creates a nightmare reality of its own.

It may still be argued, of course that the degree of Othello's irrationality manifest in his blindness to the time factor, is excessive, unrealistic, and that Iago for all his insight and daring would not have taken so great a risk. We must assume however that Shakespeare as always, knew what he was doing and presenting, and that art, the art of the theatre in particular, must concern itself with the archetypal, the universal, with that which is necessarily larger, more extreme than in life. And surely we must take into account that elsewhere in *Othello*, in the case of Bianca, the refusal of the jealous person to be bound by the rationality of time is once again drawn to our attention. Bianca, whose jealousy over Cassio motivates her every word and action, reproaches him on her first appearance with an alleged seven days and nights of neglect:

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?  
Eightscore eight hours, and lovers' absent hours,  
More tedious than the dial, eightscoretimes?  
[III. iv. 173–75]

The time here could hardly be more specifically stated, and yet, if we do not postulate the impossibility of an interval of almost a week between scenes three and four of Act III, the alleged duration of Cassio's neglect cannot be accepted. Act II begins with Cassio's arrival on Cyprus, and from this point to the moment of his encounter with Bianca the action on stage is continuous, and no more than a night and two days have elapsed before us. Once again it would seem that the irrationality of jealousy extending even into the reckoning of time is being demonstrated.

No less irrational, and no less typical of extreme jealousy, is the determination of Othello, as of Leontes, to destroy love through the anodyne of a deliberate cultivation of hatred. Here we must recognize that Othello, newly married, overwhelmed with relief to find Desdemona safe on Cyprus, has attained to an intensity of love deeper than that of Leontes for Hermione:

O my soul's joy,  
... If it were now to die,  
Twere now to be most happy, for I fear

My soul hath her content so absolute,  
That not another comfort, like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.  
[II. i. 184, 189–93]

Without hesitation, when jealousy strikes, Leontes achieves the transition from love to hate, but for Othello the process will be long drawn out, intermittent, subject to agonizing oscillations. The climax comes following the scene of final "proof", when Bianca has thrown the incriminating handkerchief back at Cassio, before Othello's eyes. The proof is not needed, for Othello's assumption of Desdemona's guilt has long been absolute, unassailable. On the other hand, love, or some remnant of it, still remains, and the moment has come, as Iago realises, for its final obliteration. Again and again, as Othello swings away in the dying agonies of love, Iago savagely recalls him:

*Othello:* ... a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!

*Iago:* Nay, you must forget.

*Othello:* And let her rot, and perish, and be damned to-night, for she shall not live; no, my heart is turn'd to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand: O, the world hath not a sweeter creature, she might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks.

*Iago:* Nay, that's not your way.

*Othello:* Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention!

*Iago:* She's the worse for all this.  
[IV. i. 178–91]

Iago, the very voice of jealousy itself, would appear to succeed. Desdemona is smothered in the bed she had contaminated, and hatred's consummation is achieved. Yet it could be argued in Othello's case, in contrast to that of Leontes, that love is never wholly obliterated. The insane grip of jealousy is such that Othello can no longer doubt his wife's guilt, but he can act against it finally only by assuming the mask of impersonal justice:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
[V. ii. 6]

And we may even wonder whether Othello, still agonizing over the beauty he must destroy, could ever have sustained his assumed and precarious role of just executioner, had not Desdemona's bewilderment and terror, interpreted as prevarication, provoked him to one last paroxysm of rage and hatred.

For a while, beyond the point it had set itself to achieve, jealousy continues to sustain its victim. But the instrument has served its deadly purpose, and can be discarded. As suddenly and totally as Leontes, Othello is abandoned to the hideous and incredulous realisation of what he has done. One moment of explanation, of truth, from Emilia is now enough. The handkerchief—She gave it Cassio? no, alas, I found it, And did give't my husband. [IV. ii. 230–31]

Othello, in the full vortex of jealousy, had already heard the truth from Emilia and facilely rejected it, "She's but a simple bawd that could not say as much" [IV. ii. 20–1 ], but now the vortex is past, the possession ending and truth, with the completeness and instantaneousness that is jealousy's final characteristic, once more

assumes control.

While Othello and Leontes, and also Bianca, present jealousy in its most characteristic form, it must be recognized that other forms and manifestations of this most devastating of human emotions are possible. At least two such variations on the play's basic theme of jealousy are to be found in *Othello*, the first of them presented by Roderigo. That Roderigo is jealous first of Othello and then of Cassio cannot be doubted, and Iago, before using him against Cassio, is careful to heighten in him the motivation of jealousy:

Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of  
his hand? . . . Lechery,  
by this hand: an index and prologue  
to the history of lust and foul thoughts:  
they met so near with their lips, that their  
breaths embrac'd together.  
[II. i. 253–54, 257–60]

Thus primed and sustained by Iago, Roderigo overcomes his native timidity to the point of provoking the drunken Cassio on guard duty, and later of undertaking his murder. Only the irrationality of a jealous man, we might infer, could explain behaviour so savagely abnormal, could account also for that ludicrous readiness to go on accepting Iago's word, all evidence to the contrary, that Desdemona might still be his. It could perhaps be objected that Roderigo is not so much jealous as simply and deeply in love, as witnessed in particular by his uncritical idealising attitude towards Desdemona, his impregnable devotion. Surely, if jealous, he would have availed himself of the jealous man's most characteristic anodyne, a saving hatred. Need we in fact go any further than Iago in his assessment of Roderigo as one turned wrong side out by love? The answer must undoubtedly be that whatever Roderigo's love may have been at the outset, it has, thanks chiefly to the machinations of Iago, deteriorated, taken on elements of the irrational and ultimately of the diabolical; and to this deterioration jealousy has in large measure contributed. Roderigo, clutching at the straws of hope reached out to him by Iago, to the extent of selling all his land and following the Cyprus wars, has clearly ceased to act and react sanely. And when, quite definitely now under the compulsion of jealousy, he nerves himself to secure Cassio's dismissal and eventually to attempt his murder, he has reached a lower moral level than Othello, who can at least persuade himself that he is the instrument of justice. To the extent, then, of his irrationality and ultimate diabolism Roderigo is at one in jealousy with an Othello or a Leontes. On the other hand his jealousy, unlike theirs, proceeds from a love that has never been requited, and the form of his madness is to persist in hope of an ultimate possession. For him the cuckold's simple anodyne of hatred and vengeance is not available.

The second and final variation on the play's central theme of jealousy is to be found, it is suggested, in Iago. The traditional association of jealousy with sexual passion or possessiveness, must not obscure the fact that other kinds of jealousy, no less virulent in operation, are to be found; although sexual jealousy, his suspicion of the involvement of both Othello and Cassio with his wife, is also a factor in Iago's motivation. Far more, however, than suspicion over a wife he clearly does not love or value very highly, are obviously at work in Iago and must be reckoned with if his extraordinary and diabolical behaviour is to be understood. The problem of Iago's motivation is certainly a major one, no less baffling than the problem of Hamlet's delay. A whole spectrum of explanations has accordingly been attempted, ranging from the famous "motiveless malignity" of [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, to simplistic assertions that Iago's motives, sexual jealousy and envy at Cassio's appointment, are perfectly adequate to explain him [see his *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor]. That Iago is indeed a jealous and envious man has of course been generally recognized; such recognition, however, can certainly be taken further, in particular in terms of those special characteristics of jealousy we have been attempting to establish.



That certain recent events have precipitated a state of jealousy in Iago is revealed to us in the first act of the play; he is jealous of Cassio over the lieutenancy which he considered his due, jealous of Othello whom he suspects of having had a liason with his wife. We can assume that the effect of these experiences, and especially the former, has been devastating, to the point of working a profound and sudden change in Iago, a virtual metamorphosis. That he is indeed villainous becomes clear to us by the end of the first act, but we can hardly believe that he has always been so, and that his universal reputation for honesty has been based over a long period of time on calculation and bluff. That a great change has been involved—is further indicated to us by the particular way in which Iago is made to announce his age: "I ha' look'd upon the world for four times seven years" [I. iii. 311–12]—a statement that would reveal, at all events to a Shakespearean audience, that here is a man arrived at one of the great seven year climacterics [critical stages], a time especially liable to crisis and change. A far reaching change, precipitated in particular by Cassio's appointment and to a lesser extent by the apparently malicious evidence presented to him of an affair between Othello and Emilia, can certainly be postulated; and thus a new Iago confronts us, jealous, embittered, vengeful, viciously repudiating the honesty and loyalty that have led him nowhere.

It is clear, however, that the jealousy by which Iago stands possessed, as totally as an Othello or 'a Leontes, is of a special, a more comprehensive kind. It contains elements of sexual provocation, but it is directed also and even more powerfully against all those whose lives continue to be motivated, as his had once been, by the conventions of love, trust, honesty and goodness, and who continue on such a basis to be happy and successful, where he himself has suffered and failed. Upon them he will proceed to avenge himself, creating out of their now hated and envied love and goodness "the net that shall enmesh 'em all" [II. iii. 362].

Once the fact and comprehensive nature of Iago's jealousy has been established, all his subsequent thoughts and acts become, by reason of their very strangeness and irrationality, intelligible. Many attempts, for example, have been made to explain in rational terms the curious "motive hunting" of Iago displayed in his first two soliloquies. Here he conjures up, or so it would appear, motive after motive for proceeding in his plot against Cassio and Othello: desire to get Cassio's place, suspicion of his wife's infidelity first with Othello and then with Cassio, his own love for Desdemona. Yet there is an element of strangeness in his way of formulating his motives, as though the motive itself rather than the degree of his belief in it were at issue. What could be stranger, for example, than the irrational combination of belief and disbelief contained in his statement on the affair between Emilia and Othello:

I know not if't be true . . .  
Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do, as if for surety.  
[I. iii. 388–901]

Also, it is hard for us to suppose that Iago really did suspect Cassio with his "nightcap," or that he was really himself in love with Desdemona. And no less strange is the fact that Iago, having formulated all his motives and proceeded into action, presumably on the strength of them, never once refers to any of them again. The irrational element in the motive hunting is certainly evident, and this, rather than the validity of the motives themselves, is what must concern us. Iago, enumerating his motives and persuading himself to believe them, only to demonstrate their irrelevance by forgetting them later, is certainly not thinking as a rational man; on the other hand, and ironically, he is reacting entirely in accordance with his own remarkable understanding of the nature of jealousy. Jealousy, as he later informs Othello, is that green eyed monster, mocking the food it feeds on. And where there is no such food, what must the jealous man do but persuade himself of its existence, endowing trifles light as air, if need be, with all the certainty of holy writ. The truth or otherwise of the reasons Iago dredges up to justify his jealous hatred of Cassio and Othello is quite irrelevant; they are the food his jealousy needs and that his intellect must provide.

Equally irrational, we must inevitably conclude, is the totality of Iago's behaviour, the way in which, with incredible persistence and ingenuity, he carries out his lunatic plot against Cassio and Othello. By way of rationalization, it is sometimes suggested that Iago starting out with no more than a vague spiteful desire to create mischief, underestimates the passions he is to awaken, and so becomes the unwilling victim of his own machinations. Certainly he is soon caught up in his own web, committed to the lies he has disseminated, unable to retreat; on the other hand he betrays no sign of ever wanting to do so, and views his own successes first against Cassio and then Othello with uninhibited satisfaction. Never once does the intrinsic *insanity* of what he is doing break through to him, the realisation, for example, that *all* the witnesses against him, Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo, Emilia, Bianca, must somehow be killed if he himself is not sooner or later to be confronted with the awakened wrath of Othello. The truly astounding cleverness of Iago must not be allowed to blind us to the absolute stupidity, indeed the madness, of what he is attempting to do.

Iago, we must conclude, even more so than a Leon-tes or an Othello, confronts us as the very archetype of the jealous man. For here is an all encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations. In this connection it is pertinent, by way of conclusion, to consider jealousy as in fact the antithesis of love, as containing within itself the very essence of evil. Iago in the list of actors in the Folio [the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays] is described as a villain, and in the first act of the play he fully reveals himself as such. However, we have suggested that by reason of his universal reputation for honesty he could not always have been evil but had become so quite suddenly under the impact of jealousy. As a result a consuming, envious hatred of the goodness and love in those who had, as he saw it, betrayed him, takes possession of his soul. Evidences of Iago's hatred of love are everywhere in the play, as for example in his bitter reaction to the outpouring of love between Othello and Desdemona at the moment of their reunion on Cyprus:

O, you are well tun'd now,  
But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,  
As honest as I am.  
[II. i. 199–201]

Or again, there is the extremely revealing moment when he recognizes in Cassio the continuation of all those qualities that he himself has irrevocably lost:

If Cassio do remain,  
He has a daily beauty in his life,  
That makes me ugly.  
[V. i. 18–20]

That Iago is a villain, perhaps the most completely villainous character in all literature, is only too evident, and that his villainy originates in, is indeed synonymous with jealousy must also be recognized. By definition the supremely evil man appears as one in whom hatred of love and goodness is carried to the point of containing within itself the desire to reach out and destroy the loving and the good. Not all men of course, fortunately enough, surrender to jealousy with the absoluteness of an Iago, but the implication of *Othello* is that there are such men bearing latent within themselves as a kind of fate a terrible capacity for evil. "God's above all", declares Cassio in a moment of drunken insight; "and there be souls that must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved". To which Iago with tragic irony replies, "It is true, good Lieutenant" [II. iii. 103–05].

That Iago is indeed a damned soul, one predestined by his own intrinsic nature to eventual damnation, is made manifest to us in a number of ways, most frequently by what we might call his conscious diabolism. Iago, in reaction against his former honesty which has failed and betrayed him, dedicates himself in a spirit of jealous revenge to honesty's opposite, evil. Consciously and deliberately he allies himself with the powers of

darkness, invoking Hell and night in his first soliloquy and later, after mocking his own "honesty" in advising Cassio to seek Desdemona's help, coining right into the open with devastating explicitness:

Divinity of hell!  
When devils will their blackest sins put on,  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
As I do now.  
[II. iii. 350–53]

A Shakespearean, witchcraft-conscious audience would have no difficulty in accepting such diabolism as fact, in recognizing Iago as one possessed, glorying in his identification with evil spiritual powers. For them, as he must be for us if we are to understand him, Iago is indeed a "demi-devil", one who can, rhetorically at least, be thought of as possessing the cloven hoof. Equally indicative of diabolism, of the way in which Iago serves and is in turn assisted by the powers of evil, is the disturbing and consistent "run of luck" that he is made to enjoy in carrying out his plans. He causes Roderigo to provoke Cassio on guard, but could not foresee that Cassio in his rage would attack and severely wound Montano. He could advise Cassio to seek the intercession of Desdemona, but could not anticipate her naive importunity or the luckless moments when she should manifest it. Nor could he anticipate that the fatal handkerchief would come into his hands, or that Bianca in a jealous fit would throw it back at Cassio while Othello watched. All this would be sensed in some measure by Shakespeare's audience as indicating the involvement of evil beings, ascendant for the moment, and possessed with a jealous hatred of love and goodness just as their instrument, Iago, is himself possessed.

The close association between evil and jealousy is a dominant issue in *Othello*, almost what the whole play is about; until we are left with the conclusion that there can scarcely be an evil act for which envy or jealousy is not in some degree or wholly responsible. The outcome for love and goodness and innocence in *Othello* is almost unendurably tragic; yet tragedy, as always in Shakespeare, is never allowed the final word. Iago the destroyer is by himself destroyed. Jealousy, self-harming, irrational, demonstrates once again the intrinsic instability of evil, the ultimate impotence of the jealous gods. (pp. 210–19)

D. R. Godfrey, "Shakespeare and the Green-Eyed Monster," in *Neophilologus*, Vol. LVI, No. 2, April, 1972, pp. 207–20.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Race

In this excerpt, Ruth Cowhig provides background on blacks in England during Shakespeare's time. She concludes that Iago's racism is the source of his hatred of Othello, and that he plays on the prejudices of other characters to turn them against the Moor. Cowhig asserts that Shakespeare consistently challenges stereotypes with his depiction of Othello.

### Ruth Cowhig

*[Cowhig provides background on blacks in England during Shakespeare's time, stressing the use of racial stereotypes in the dramas of the period. Observing that black people were typically depicted as stock villains, she suggests that Shakespeare's presentation of the noble, dignified Othello as the hero of a tragedy must have been startling to Elizabethan audiences. Cowhig also examines how several characters in the play, especially Iago, are racially prejudiced. Iago's racism is the source of his hatred of Othello, she claims, and he plays on the prejudices of other characters to turn them against the Moor. Importantly, Cowhig emphasizes that, although Shakespeare consistently challenges stereotypes with his depiction of Othello, he also demonstrates*

*that, in a white society, the Moor's color isolates him and makes him vulnerable.]*

It is difficult to assess the reactions and attitudes of people in sixteenth-century Britain to the relatively few blacks living amongst them. Their feelings would certainly be very mixed: strangeness and mystery producing a certain fascination and fostering a taste for the exotic: on the other hand prejudice and fear, always easily aroused by people different from ourselves, causing distrust and hostility. This hostility would be encouraged by the widespread belief in the legend that blacks were descendants of Ham in the Genesis story, punished for sexual excess by their blackness. Sexual potency was therefore one of the attributes of the prototype black. Other qualities associated with black people were courage, pride, guilelessness, credulity and easily aroused passions—the list found in John Leo's *The Geographical History of Africa*, a book written in Arabic early in the sixteenth century and translated into English in 1600. Contemporary attitudes may have been more influenced by literary works such as this than by direct experience; but recently the part played by such direct contacts has been rediscovered. The scholarly and original study [*Othello's Countrymen*] by Eldred Jones of these contacts and their effects on Renaissance drama has transformed contemporary attitudes.

Black people were introduced into plays and folk dancing in mediaeval England and later, during the sixteenth century, they often appeared in the more sophisticated court masques. In these, the blackness was at first suggested by a very fine lawn [linen fabric] covering the faces, necks, arms and hands of the actors. Then black stockings, masks and wigs were used; such items are mentioned in surviving lists of properties [theater "props"]. These characters were mainly valued for the exotic aesthetic effects which their contrasting colour provided. The culmination of this tradition can be seen in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* in 1605, which he produced in answer to Queen Anne's request that the masquers should be 'black—mores at first'. The theme is based upon the longing of the black daughters of Niger to gain whiteness and beauty. This surely contradicts the idea that Elizabethans and Jacobean were not conscious of colour and had no prejudice: the desirability of whiteness is taken for granted!

Elizabethan drama also used Moorish characters for visual effects and for their association with strange and remote countries. In [Christopher] Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, for instance, the three Moorish kings play little part in the plot, and have no individual character. Their main contribution to the play is in adding to the impression of power and conquest by emphasising the extent of Tamburlaine's victories. Their blackness also provides a variety of visual effects in the masques. Marlowe's plays reflect the curiosity of his contemporaries about distant countries, and must have whetted the appetites of his audiences for war and conquest; but the black characters are seen from the outside and have no human complexity. (pp. 1–2)

Only as we recognise the familiarity of the figure of the black man as villain in Elizabethan drama can we appreciate what must have been the startling impact on Shakespeare's audience of a black hero of outstanding qualities in his play *Othello*. Inevitably we are forced to ask questions which we cannot satisfactorily answer. Why did Shakespeare choose a black man as the hero of one of his great tragedies? What experience led the dramatist who had portrayed the conventional stereotype in Aaron [in *Titus Andronicus*] in 1590 to break completely with tradition ten years later? Had Shakespeare any direct contact with black people? Why did he select the tale of Othello from the large number of Italian stories available to him?

We cannot answer such questions with certainty, but we may speculate. Until the publication of Eldred Jones' study, *Othello's Countrymen*, in 1965, it was generally assumed that Shakespeare depended only on literary sources for his black characters. Although the presence of black people in England is well documented, it went unrecognised. There are two main sources of information. One is [Richard] Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, the huge collection of narratives of Elizabethan sailors and traders which Hakluyt collected and published in twelve volumes. Volumes VI and XI describe voyages during which black men from West Africa were taken aboard, brought back to England, and afterwards used as interpreters on subsequent voyages. Later, between 1562 and 1568, [John] Hawkins had the unhappy distinction of being the first of the English gentleman slave-traders; as well as bringing 'blackamoors' to England, he sold hundreds

of black slaves to Spain.

The other evidence is in the series of royal proclamations and state papers which call attention to the 'great number of Negroes and *blackamoors* "in the realm, "of which *kinde* of people there are *all-ready here too manye*'. They were regarded by Queen Elizabeth as a threat to her own subjects \*in these hard times of dearth'. Negotiations were carried on between the Queen and Casper van Sen-den, merchant of Lubeck, to cancel her debt to him for transporting between two and three hundred English prisoners from Spain and Portugal back to England by allowing him to take up a similar number of unwanted black aliens—presumably to sell them as slaves. Although the correspondence shows that the deal never materialised, since the 'owners' of these 'blackamoors' refused to give them up, it is clear that there were several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and landed gentry, or working in London taverns. (pp. 4–5)

Thus the sight of black people must have been familiar to Londoners. London was a very busy port, but still a relatively small and overcrowded city, so Shakespeare could hardly have avoided seeing them. What thoughts did he have as he watched their faces, men uprooted from their country, their homes and families? I cannot help thinking of Rembrandt's moving study of *The Two Negroes* painted some sixty years later, which expresses their situation poignantly. The encounter with real blacks on the streets of London would have yielded a sense of their common humanity, which would have conflicted with the myths about their cultural, sexual and religious 'otherness' found in the travel books. The play between reality and myth informs *Titus Andronicus*: Shakespeare presents Aaron as a demon, but at the end of the play suddenly shatters the illusion of myth by showing Aaron to be a black person with common feelings of compassion—and fatherly care for his child. In *Othello* too there is conscious manipulation of reality and myth: Othello is presented initially (through the eyes of Iago and Roderigo) as a dangerous beast, before he reveals himself to be of noble, human status, only to degenerate later to the condition of bloodthirsty and irrational animalism. It is surely not surprising that Shakespeare, the dramatist whose sympathy for the despised alien upsets the balance of the otherwise 'unrealistic' *The Merchant of Venice* should want to create a play about a kind of black man not yet seen on the English stage; a black man whose humanity is eroded by the cunning and racism of whites.

Shakespeare's choice of a black hero for his tragedy must have been deliberate. His direct source was an Italian tale from [Gerald] Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565); he followed this tale in using the love between a Moor and a young Venetian girl of high birth as the basis of his plot, but in little else. The original story is crude and lacking in subtlety. Cinthio, in accordance with the demands of the time, expresses concern that his tale should have a moral purpose. He gives it as recommending that young people should not marry against the family's wishes, and especially not with someone separated from them by nature, heaven and mode of life. Such a moral has nothing to do with Shakespeare's play, except in so far as he uses it ironically, so his choice of the tale remains obscure. Perhaps he regretted his creation of the cruel and malevolent Aaron, and found himself imagining the feelings of proud men, possibly of royal descent in their own countries, humiliated and degraded as slaves. Whatever his intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the significance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play. This is all the more important because teachers will find it largely ignored by critical commentaries.

The first effect of Othello's blackness is immediately grasped by the audience, but not always by the reader. It is that he is placed in isolation from the other characters from the very beginning of the play. This isolation is an integral part of Othello's experience constantly operative even if not necessarily at a conscious level; anyone black will readily appreciate that Othello's colour is important for our understanding of his character. Even before his first entry we are forced to focus our attention on his race: the speeches of Iago and Roderigo in the first scene are full of racial antipathy. Othello is 'the thick lips' [I. i. 66], 'an old black ram' [I. i. 88], 'a lascivious Moor' [I. i. 126] and 'a Barbary horse' [I. i. 111–12], and 'he is making the beast with two backs' [cf. I. i. 116–17] with Desdemona. The language is purposely offensive and sexually coarse, and the animal images convey, as they always do, the idea of someone less than human. Iago calculates on arousing in Brabantio all the latent prejudice of Venetian society, and he succeeds. To Brabantio the union is 'a treason of

the blood' [I. i. 169], and he feels that its acceptance will reduce Venetian statesmen to 'bondslaves and pagans' [I. ii. 99].

Brabantio occupies a strong position in society. He

is much beloved  
And hath in his effect a voice potential  
As double as the Duke's  
[I. ii. 12–14]

according to Iago. Although he represents a more liberal attitude than Iago's, at least on the surface, his attitude is equally prejudiced. He makes Othello's meetings with Desdemona possible by entertaining him in his own home, but his reaction to the news of the elopement is predictable. He is outraged that this black man should presume so far, and concludes that he must have used charms and witchcraft since otherwise his daughter could never 'fall in love with what she feared to look on' [I. iii. 98]. To him the match is 'against all rules of nature' [I. iii. 101], and when he confronts Othello his abuse is as bitter as Iago's.

But before this confrontation, the audience has seen Othello and we have been impressed by two characteristics. First his pride:

I fetch my life and being  
From men of royal siege.  
[I. ii. 21–2]

and secondly, his confidence in his own achievements and position:

My services which I have done the Signioiy  
Shall out-tongue his complaints.  
[I. ii. 18–19]

It is hard to overestimate the reactions of a Renaissance audience to this unfamiliar black man, so noble in bearing and so obviously master of the situation. But however great Othello's confidence, his defence, Brabantio's expectation of support from the Duke and senate would surely have been realised. He is disappointed; the Duke treats Othello as befits his position as commander-in-chief, addressing him as 'valiant Othello'. The only support Brabantio receives is from the first senator, whose parting words, 'Adieu, brave Moor, Use Desdemona well' [I. iii. 291], while not unfriendly, reveal a superior attitude. Would a senator have so advised a newly married general if he had been white and equal?

Desdemona's stature in the play springs directly from Othello's colour. Beneath a quiet exterior lay the spirited independence which comes out in her defence of her marriage before the Senate. She has resisted the pressures of society to make an approved marriage, shunning 'The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation' [I. ii. 68]. Clearly, Brabantio had exerted no force: he was no Capulet [in *Romeo and Juliet*]. But Desdemona was well aware of the seriousness of her decision to marry Othello: 'my downright violence and storm of fortune' [I. iii. 249] she calls it. Finally she says that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' [I. iii. 252]: obviously the audience, conditioned by prejudice, had to make the effort to overcome, with her, the tendency to associate Othello's black face with evil, or at least with inferiority.

It is made clear that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona is fully consummated. Desdemona is as explicit as decorum allows:

If I be left behind  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for why I love him are bereft me.  
[I. iii. 255–57]

Othello, on the other hand, disclaims the heat of physical desire when asking that she should go with him to Cyprus:

I therefore beg it not  
To please the palate of my appetite,  
Nor to comply with heat—the young affects  
In me defunct.  
[I. iii. 261–64]

These speeches relate directly to Othello's colour. Desdemona has to make it clear that his 'sooty bosom' (her father's phrase) is no obstacle to desire; while Othello must defend himself against the unspoken accusations, of the audience as well as of the senators, because of the association of sexual lust with blackness.

In Act III Scene iii, often referred to as the temptation scene, Othello's faith in Desdemona is gradually undermined by Iago's insinuations, and he is eventually reduced by jealousy to an irrational madness. Iago's cynical cunning plays upon Othello's trustfulness:

The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.  
[I. iii. 399–400]

The spectacle of Othello's disintegration is perhaps the most painful in the whole Shakespeare canon: and Iago's destructive cruelty has seemed to many critics to be inadequately motivated. They have spoken of 'motiveless malignity' and 'diabolic intellect', sometimes considering Iago's to be the most interesting character in the play. I think this is an unbalanced view, resulting from the failure to recognise racial issues. Iago's contempt for Othello, despite his grudging recognition of his qualities, his jealousy over Cassio's 'preferment', and the gnawing hatred which drives him on are based upon an arrogant racism. He harps mercilessly upon the unnaturalness of the marriage between Othello and Desdemona:

Not to affect many proposed matches,  
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—  
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.  
[III. iii. 229–33]

The exclamation of disgust and the words 'smell' and 'foul' reveal a phobia so obvious that it is strange that it is often passed over. The attack demolishes Othello's defences because this kind of racial contempt exposes his basic insecurity as an alien in a white society. His confidence in Desdemona expressed in 'For she had eyes, and chose me' [I. iii. 189], changes to the misery of

Haply for I am black  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have . . .  
[III. iii. 263–65]

This is one of the most moving moments in the play. Given Iago's hatred and astuteness in exploit-game. We are watching the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms.

Othello's jealous madness is the more terrifying because of the noble figure he presented in the early scenes, when he is addressed as 'brave Othello' and 'our noble and valiant general' [II. ii. 1], and when proud self-control is his essential quality; he refuses to be roused to anger by Brabantio and Roderigo; 'Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust them' [I. ii. 58]. After his breakdown we are reminded by Ludovico of his previous moral strengths and self-control: 'Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake?' [IV. i. 265–66]. Thus the portrait is of a man who totally contradicts the contemporary conception of the black man as one easily swayed by passion. He is the most attractive of all Shakespeare's soldier heroes: one who has achieved high rank entirely on merit. His early history given in Desdemona's account of his wooing is typical of the bitter experience of an African of his times 'Taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery' [I. iii. 137–38]. Othello's military career is everything to him, and the famous 'farewell' speech of Act IV, with its aura of romantic nostalgia, expresses the despair of a man whose achievements have been reduced to nothing: 'Othello's occupation gone' [in. iii. 357]. Spoken by a black Othello, the words 'The big wars / That make ambition virtue' [III. iii. 349–50], have a meaning beyond more rhetoric. Ambition was still reckoned as a sin in Shakespeare's time; but in Othello's case it has been purified by his courage and endurance and by the fact that only ambition could enable him to escape the humiliations of his early life. When he realises that his career is irrevocably over, he looks back at the trappings of war—the 'pride, pomp and circumstance' [III. iii. 354], the 'spirit-stirring drum' [III. iii. 352] and the rest—as a dying man looks back on life.

The sympathies of the audience for Othello are Othello throughout his career, saw the problem of the final scene as 'acting the part so as to make people love Othello and forget he is a murderer'. When Othello answers Ludovico's rhetorical question 'What shall be said of thee?' [V. ii. 293] with the words, 'An honourable murderer, if you will' [V. ii. 294], we are not outraged by such a statement: instead we see in it a terrible pathos. What we are waiting for is the unmasking of Iago. When this comes, Othello looks down at Iago's feet for the mythical cloven hoofs and demands an explanation from that 'demi-devil', reminding us that blackness of soul in this play belongs to the white villain rather than to his black victim.

The fact that Othello was a baptised Christian had considerable importance for Shakespeare's audience. This is made explicit from the beginning when he quells the drunken broil with the words: 'For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl' [II. iii. 172]. In the war he was seen to be leading the forces of Christendom against the Turks. But once Othello becomes subservient to Iago and vows his terrible revenge he seems to revert to superstitious beliefs. How else can we interpret his behaviour over the handkerchief? He seems under the spell of its long history—woven by an old sibyl out of silkworms strangely 'hallowed', given to his mother by an Egyptian with thought-reading powers, and linked with the dire prophecy of loss of love should it be lost. Yet in the final scene it becomes merely, 'An antique token / My father gave my mother' [V. ii. 216–17]. This irrational inconsistency is dramatically credible and suggests that when reason is overthrown, Othello's Christian beliefs give way to the superstitions he has rejected. The Christian veneer is thin. (pp. 7–12)

Shakespeare raises these and other questions about blackness and whiteness without fully resolving them. It rested upon the Elizabethan audience to consider them, this very act of deliberation involving a disturbance of racial complacency. If his purpose was to unsettle or perplex his audience, then he succeeded beyond expectation, for the question of Othello's blackness, and his relation with the white Desdemona, is one that provoked contradictory and heated responses in subsequent centuries. (p. 14)

Ruth Cowhig, "Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's Othello," in her *The Black Presence in English Literature*, Manchester University Press, 1985, pp. 1–25.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)



## Time

In this excerpt, Harley Granville–Barker examines the dramatic structure of *Othello* and explicates the relation between Shakespeare's manipulation of time and the theme of sexual jealousy. The critic contends that the precipitous action is both dramatically convincing, since it hurries the audience along, and consistent with the recklessness of Iago and the pathological sexual jealousy that flaws the character of Othello.

### Harley Granville–Barker

*[Granville–Barker examines the dramatic structure of Othello and explicates the relation between Shakespeare's manipulation of time and the theme of sexual jealousy. He maintains that time in Act I passes naturally so that the audience can become familiar with the characters. Act II, however, introduces contractions and ambiguities of time that are sustained until Act V, scene ii, when "natural" time resumes, presenting a comprehensive view of the ruined Moor. The critic contends that the precipitous action is both dramatically convincing, since it hurries the audience along, and consistent with the recklessness of Iago and the pathological sexual jealousy that flaws the character of Othello.]*

[In *Othello*] time is given no unity of treatment at all; it is contracted and expanded like a concertina. For the play's opening and closing the time of the action is the time of its acting; and such an extent of "natural" time (so to call it) is unusual. But minutes stand for hours over the sighting, docking and discharging—with a storm raging, too!—of the three ships which have carried the characters to Cyprus; the entire night of Cassio's undoing passes uninterruptedly in the speaking space of four hundred lines; and we have, of course, Othello murdering Desdemona within twenty-four hours of the consummation of their marriage, when, if Shakespeare let us—or let Othello himself—pause to consider, she plainly cannot be guilty of adultery.

Freedom with time is, of course, one of the recognised freedoms of Shakespeare's stage; he is expected only to give his exercise of it the slightest dash of plausibility. But in the maturity of his art he learns how to draw positive dramatic profit from it. For this play's beginning he does not, as we have noted, contract time at all. Moreover, he allows seven hundred lines to the three first scenes when he could well have done their business in half the space or less, could even, as [Samuel] Johnson suggests [in an end-note to *Othello* in his made evident when later, by contrast, we find him using contraction of time, and the heightening of tension so facilitated, to disguise the incongruities of the action. For he can do this more easily if he has already familiarised us with the play's characters. And he has done that more easily by presenting them to us in the unconstraint of uncontracted time, asking us for no special effort of make-believe. Accepting what they are, we the more readily accept what they do. It was well, in particular, to make Iago familiarly lifelike. If his victims are to believe in him, so, in another sense, must we. Hence the profuse self-display to Roderigo. That there is as much lying as truth in it is no matter. A man's lying, once we detect it, is as eloquent of him as the truth.

The contraction of time for the arrival in Cyprus has its dramatic purpose too. Shakespeare could have relegated the business to hearsay. But the spectacular excitement, the suspense, the ecstatic happiness of the reuniting of Othello and Desdemona, give the action fresh stimulus and impetus and compensate for the break in it occasioned by the voyage. Yet there must be no dwelling upon this, which is still only prelude to the capital events to come. For the same reason, the entire night of Cassio's undoing passes with the uninterrupted speaking of four hundred lines. It is no more than a sample of Iago's skill, so it must not be lingered upon either. Amid the distracting variety of its comings and goings we do not remark the contraction. As Iago himself has been let suggest to us:

Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.

[II. iii. 379]

Then, upon the entrance of Cassio with his propitiatory aubade and its suggestion of morning, commences the sustained main stretch of the action. This is set to something more complex than a merely contracted, it goes to a sort of ambiguous scheme of time, not only a profitable, but here—for Shakespeare turning story into play—an almost necessary device. After that we have the long last scene set to "natural" time, the play thus ending as it began. The swift-moving, close-packed action, fit product of Iago's ravening will, is over.

Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed.  
[s.d., V. ii. 1]

—and, the dreadful deed done, all is done. While the rest come and go about him:

Here is my journey's end . . .  
[V. ii. 267]

he says, as at a standstill, as in a very void of time.

And as the "natural" time at the play's beginning let us observe the better the man he was, so relaxation to it now lets us mark more fully the wreck that remains.

The three opening scenes move to a scheme of their own, in narrative and in the presentation of character. The first gives us a view of Iago which, if to be proved superficial, is yet a true one (for Shakespeare will never introduce a character mis-leadingly), and a sample of his double-dealing. Roderigo at the same time paints us a thick-lipped, lascivious Moor, which we discover in the second scene, with a slight, pleasant shock of surprise at the sight of Othello himself, to have been merely a figment of his own jealous chagrin. There also we find quite another Iago: the modest, devoted, disciplined soldier. . . . The third scene takes us to the Senate House, where Brabantio and his griefs, which have shrilly dominated the action so far, find weightier competition in the question of the war, and the State's need of Othello, whose heroic aspect is heightened by this. (pp. 11–14)

The scenic mobility of Shakespeare's stage permits him up to [I. iii] to translate his narrative straightforwardly into action. We pass, that is to say, from Brabantio's house, which Desdemona has just quitted, to the Sagittary, where she and Othello are to be found, and from there to the Senate House, to which he and she (later) and Brabantio are summoned. And the movement itself is given dramatic value by its quickening or slackening or abrupt arrest. We have the feverish impetus of Brabantio's torchlight pursuit; Othello's calm talk to Iago set in sequence and contrast; the encounter with the other current of the servants of the Duke upon their errand; the halt, the averted conflict; then the passing on together of the two parties, in sobered but still hostile detachment, towards the Senate House.

Note also that such narrative as is needed of what has passed before the play begins is mainly postponed to the third of these opening scenes. By then we should be interested in the characters, and the more, therefore, in the narrative itself, which is, besides, given a dramatic value of its own by being framed as a cause pleaded before the Senate. Further, even while we listen to the rebutting of Brabantio's accusation of witchcraft by Othello's "round unvarnished tale" [I. iii. 90], we shall be expecting Desdemona's appearance, the one important figure in this part of the story still to be seen. And this expectancy offsets the risk of the slackening of tension which reminiscent narrative must always involve.

Shakespeare now breaks the continuity of the action: and such a clean break as this is with him unusual. He has to transport his characters to Cyprus. The next scene takes place there. An unmeasured interval of time is suggested, and no scene on shipboard or the like has been provided for a link, nor are any of the events of the voyage recounted. The tempest which drowns the Turks, and rids him of his now superfluous war, and has more to do with Desdemona—something of this he does contrive to present to us; and we are plunged into it as we

were into the crisis of the play's opening:

What from the cape can you discern at sea?

Nothing at all. It is a high-wrought flood;  
I cannot, 'twixt the heaven and the main  
Descry a sail.  
[II. i. 1–4]

—a second start as strenuous as the first. The excitement offsets the breaking of the continuity. And the compression of the events, of the storm and the triple landing, then the resolution of the fears for Othello's safety into the happiness of the reuniting of the two—the bringing of all this within the space of a few minutes' acting raises tension to a high pitch and holds it there. (pp. 14–16)

The proclamation in [II. ii] serves several subsidiary purposes. It helps settle the characters in Cyprus. The chances and excitements of the arrival are over. Othello is in command; but the war is over too, and he only needs bid the people rejoice at peace and his happy marriage. It economically sketches us a background for Cassio's ill-fated carouse. It allows a small breathing space before Iago definitely gets to work. It "neutralises" the action for a moment (a herald is an anonymous voice; he has no individuality), suspends its interest without breaking its continuity. Also it brings its present timelessness to an end; events are given a clock to move by, and with that take on a certain urgency, (pp. 22–3)

[In Act III, scene iii,] the action passes into the ambiguity of time which has troubled so many critics. *Compression* of time, by one means or another, is common form in most drama; we ... [see] it put to use in the speeding through a single unbroken scene of the whole night of Cassio's betrayal. But now comes—if we are examining the craft of the play—something more complex. When it is acted we notice nothing unusual, and neither story nor characters appear false in retrospect. It is as with the perspective of a picture, painted to be seen from a certain standpoint. Picture and play can be enjoyed and much of their art appreciated with no knowledge of how the effect is gained. But the student needs to know.

We have reached the morrow of the arrival in Cyprus and of the consummation of the marriage. This is plain. It is morning. By the coming midnight or a little later Othello will have murdered Desdemona and killed himself. To that measure of time, plainly demonstrated, the rest of the play's action will move. It comprises no more than seven scenes. From this early hour we pass without interval—the clock no more than customarily speeded—to midday dinner time and past it. Then comes a break in the action (an empty stage; one scene ended, another beginning), which, however, can only allow for a quite inconsiderable interval of time, to judge, early in the following scene, by Desdemona's "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" [III. iv. 23]—the handkerchief which we have recently seen Emilia retrieve and pass to Iago. And later in this scene Cassio gives it to Bianca, who begs that she may see him "soon at night" [III. iv. 198]. Then comes another break in the action. But, again, it can involve no long interval of time; since in the scene following Bianca speaks of the handkerchief given her "even now". Later in this scene Lodovico, suddenly come from Venice, is asked by Othello to supper; and between Cassio and Bianca there has been more talk of "tonight" and "supper". Another break in the action; but, again, little or no passing of time can be involved, since midway through the next scene the trumpets sound to supper, and Iago closes it with

It is now high supper-time and the night grows to waste. . . .  
[IV. ii. 242–43]

The following scene opens with Othello, Desdemona and Lodovico coming from supper, with Othello's command to Desdemona:

Get you to bed on the instant. . . .  
[IV. iii. 7]

and ends with her good-night to Emilia. The scene after—of the ambush for Cassio—we have been explicitly told is to be made by Iago to "fall out between twelve and one" [IV. ii. 236–37], and it is, we find, pitch dark, and the town is silent. And from here Othello and Emilia patently go straight to play their parts in the last scene of all, he first, she later, as quickly as she can speed.

These, then, are the events of a single day; and Shakespeare is at unusual pains to make this clear, by the devices of the morning music, dinnertime, supper-time and the midnight dark, and their linking together by the action itself and reference after reference in the dialogue. Nor need we have any doubt of his reasons for this. Only by thus precipitating the action can it be made both effective in the terms of his stage-craft and convincing. If Othello were left time for reflection or the questioning of anyone but Iago, would not the whole flimsy fraud that is practised on him collapse?

But this granted, are they convincing as the events of that particular day, the very morrow of the reunion and of the consummation of the marriage?

Plainly they will not be; and before long Shakespeare has begun to imply that we are weeks or months—or it might be a year or more—away from anything of the sort.

What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?  
I saw it not, thought it not; it harmed not me;  
I slept the next night well, was free and merry;  
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips. . . .  
[ffl. iii. 338–41]

That is evidence enough, but a variety of other implications go to confirm it; Iago's

I lay with Cassio lately.  
[III. iii. 413]

Cassio's reference to his "former suit", Bianca's reproach to him

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?  
Eight score eight hours. . . . ?  
[m. iv. 173–74]

and more definitely yet, Lodovico's arrival from Venice with the mandate of recall, the war being over—by every assumption of the sort, indeed, Othello and Desdemona and the rest are living the life of [Giraldi] Cinthio's episodic story [in his *Gli Hecatommithi*, from which Shakespeare derived the plot of *Othello*], not at the forced pace of Shakespeare's play. But he wants to make the best of both these calendars; and, in his confident, reckless, dexterous way, he contrives to do so.

Why, however, does he neglect the obvious and simple course of allowing a likely lapse of time between the night of the arrival and of Cassio's disgrace and the priming of Othello to suspect Desdemona and her kindness to him, for which common sense—both our own, and, we might suppose, Iago's—cries out? A sufficient answer is that there has been one such break in the action already, forced on him by the voyage to Cyprus, and he must avoid another.

The bare Elizabethan stage bred a panoramic form of drama; the story straightforwardly unfolded, as many as possible of its more telling incidents presented, narrative supplying the antecedents and filling the gaps. Its only resources of any value are the action itself and the speech; and the whole burden, therefore, of stimulating and sustaining illusion falls on the actor—who, once he has captured his audience, must, like the spellbinding orator he may in method much resemble, be at pains to hold them, or much of his work will continually be to do over again. Our mere acceptance of the fiction, of the story and its peopling, we shall perhaps not withdraw; we came prepared to accept it. Something subtler is involved; the sympathy (in the word's stricter sense) which the art of the actor will have stirred in us. This current interrupted will not be automatically restored. Our emotions, roused and let grow cold, need quick rousing again. And the effects of such forced stoking are apt to stale with repetition.

Hence the help to the Elizabethan actor, with so much dependent on him, of continuity of action. Having once captured his audience, they are the easier to hold. The dramatist finds this too. Shakespeare escapes dealing with minor incidents of the voyage to Cyprus by ignoring them; and he restarts the interrupted action amid the stimulating anxieties of the storm. But such another sustaining device would be hard to find. And were he to allow a likely lapse of time before the attack on Othello's confidence is begun it would but suggest to us when it is begun and we watch it proceeding the equal likelihood of an Iago wisely letting enough time pass between assault for the poison's full working. And with that the whole dramatic fabric would begin to crumble. Here would be Cinthio's circumspect Ensign again, and the action left stagnating, the onrush of Othello's passion to be checked and checked again, and he given time to reflect and anyone the opportunity to enlighten him! Give him such respite, and if he then does not, by the single stroke of good sense needed, free himself from the fragile web of lies which is choking him, he will indeed seem to be simply the gull and dolt "as ignorant as dirt" [V. ii. 164] of Emilia's final invective, no tragic hero, certainly.

Shakespeare has to work within the close confines of the dramatic form; and this imposes on him a double economy, a shaping of means to end and end to means, of characters to the action, the action to the characters also. If Othello's ruin is not accomplished without pause or delay, it can hardly be accomplished at all. The circumstances predicate an Iago of swift and reckless decision. These are the very qualities, first, to help him to his barren triumph, then to ensure his downfall. And Othello's precipitate fall from height to depth is tragically appropriate to the man he is—as to the man he is made to be because the fall must be precipitate. Finally, that we may rather feel with Othello in his suffering than despise him for the folly of it, we are speeded through time as unwittingly as he is, and left little more chance for reflection.

Most unconscionable treatment of time truly, had time any independent rights! But effect is all. And Shakespeare smooths incongruities away by letting the action follow the shorter, the "hourly" calendar—from dawn and the aubade to midnight and the murder—without more comment than is necessary, while he takes the longer one for granted in a few incidental references. He has only to see that the two do not clash in any overt contradiction.

The change into ambiguity of time is effected in the course of Iago's opening attack upon Othello. This is divided into two, with the summons to dinner and the finding and surrender of the handkerchief for an interlude, in the earlier part—although it is taken for granted—there is no very definite reference to the longer calendar; and Iago, to begin with, deals only in its generalities. Not until the second part do we have the determinate "I lay with Cassio lately. . . " [III. iii. 413], the story of his dream, the matter of the handkerchief, and Othello's own

I slept the next night well, was free and merry;  
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.  
[III. iii. 340–41]

with the implication that weeks or months may have passed since the morrow of the landing. But why no tribute to likelihood here of some longer interval than that provided merely by the dinner to "the generous islanders" [III. iii. 280], between the sowing of the poison and its fierce, full fruition? There are two answers. From the standpoint of likelihood a suggested interval of days or weeks would largely defeat its own purpose, since the time given the poison to work would seem time given to good sense to intervene too. From the standpoint simply of the play's action, any interruption hereabouts, actual or suggested, must lower its tension and dissipate our interest, at the very juncture, too, when its main business, over-long held back, is fairly under way. Shakespeare will certainly not feel called on to make such a sacrifice to mere likelihood. He does loosen the tension of the inmost theme—all else beside, it would soon become intolerable—upon Othello's departure with Desdemona and by the episode of the handkerchief. But with Iago conducting this our interest will be surely held; and, Emilia left behind, the scene continuing, the continuity of action is kept. And when Othello returns, transformed in the interval from the man merely troubled in mind to a creature incapable of reason, "eaten up with passion ..." [III. iii. 391], his emotion reflected in us will let us also lose count of time, obliterate yesterday in today, confound the weeks with the months in the one intolerable moment

But the over-riding explanation of this show of Shakespeare's stagecraft is that he is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all. These, and other outward circumstances, must be given plausibility. But the play's essential action lies in the processes of thought and feeling by which the characters are moved and the story is forwarded. And the deeper the springs of these the less do time, place, and circumstance affect them. His imagination is concerned with fundamental passions, and its swift working demands uncumbered expression. He may falsify the calendar for his convenience: but we shall find neither trickery nor anomaly in the planning of the battle for Othello's soul. And in the light of the truth of this the rest passes unnoticed. (pp. 30–8)

Harley Granville-Barker, in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Othello*, fourth series, Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1945. p 223.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Othello

In the first excerpt, Albert Gerard examines Othello's personality, discovering cracks in the "facade" of the generous, confident self-disciplined husband and general. The second excerpt is by Wyndham Lewis, who wrote in a deliberately provocative style and outside the mainstream of Shakespearean criticism. Lewis argues that Othello depicts "the race of men at war with the race of titans" and that the gods have predetermined that Iago, the petty Everyman, will triumph over the grandeur of Othello.

### Albert Gerard

*[Gerard examines Othello's personality, discovering cracks in the "facade" of the generous, confident self-disciplined husband and general. The critic argues that Othello believes that his marriage to Desdemona will transform his life from one of primitive "chaos" to one of civilization and contentment. This naive dream shatters, however, with his increasing jealousy and his growing awareness that his new-found happiness is an illusion. Gerard thus regards Othello's development as a change from innocence to self-awareness and recognition that he has been looking outside—to Desdemona and Venetian society—rather than inside himself for his sense of identity.]*

At the beginning of the play, Othello appears as a noble figure, generous, composed, self-possessed. Besides, he is glamorously happy, both as a general and as a husband. He seems to be a fully integrated man, a great personality at peace with itself. But if we care to scrutinize this impressive and attractive facade, we find that

there is a crack in it. which might be described as follows: it is the happiness of a spoilt child, not of a mature mind; it is the brittle wholeness of Innocence; it is pre-conscious, pre-rational, pre-moral. Othello has not yet come to grips with the experience of inner crisis. He has had to overcome no moral obstacles. He has not yet left the chamber of maiden-thought, and is still blessedly unaware of the burden of the mystery.

Of course, the life of a general, with its tradition of obedience and authority, is never likely to give rise to acute moral crises—especially at a time when war crimes had not yet been invented. But even Othello's love affair with Desdemona, judging by his own report, seems to have developed smoothly, without painful moral searchings of any kind. Nor is there for him any heart-rending contradiction between his love and his career: Desdemona is even willing to share the austerity of his flinty couch, so that he has every reason to believe that he will be allowed to make the best of both worlds.

Yet, at the core of this monolithic content, there is at least one ominous contradiction which announces the final disintegration of his personality: the contradiction between his obvious openheartedness, honesty and self-approval, and the fact that he does not think it beneath his dignity to court and marry Desdemona secretly. This contradiction is part and parcel of Shakespeare's conscious purpose. As Allardyce Nicoll has observed [in his *Shakespeare*], there is no such secrecy in [Giraldi] Cinthio's tale [the source for Shakespeare's plot of *Othello*], where, instead, the marriage occurs openly, though in the teeth of fierce parental opposition.

Highly significant, too, is the fact that he does not seem to feel any remorse for this most peculiar procedure. When at last he has to face the irate Brabantio, he gives no explanation, offers no apology for his conduct. Everything in his attitude shows that he is completely unaware of infringing the *mores* of Venetian society, the ethical code of Christian behaviour, and the sophisticated conventions of polite morality. Othello quietly thinks of himself as a civilized Christian and a prominent citizen of Venice, certainly not as a barbarian (see II. iii. 170–72). He shares in Desdemona's illusion that his true visage is in his mind.

Beside the deficient understanding of the society into which he has made his way, the motif of the secret marriage then also suggests a definite lack of self-knowledge on Othello's part. His first step towards "perception of sense" about himself occurs in the middle of Act III. While still trying to resist Iago's innuendoes, Othello exclaims:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,  
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again.  
[III. iii. 90–2]

This word, "again", is perhaps the most unexpected word that Shakespeare could have used here. It is one of the most pregnant words in the whole tragedy. It indicates {a} Othello's dim sense that his life before he fell in love with Desdemona was in a state of chaos, in spite of the fact that he was at the time quite satisfied with it, and [b] his conviction that his love has redeemed him from chaos, has lifted him out of his former barbarousness. Such complacency shows his total obliviousness of the intricacies, the subtleties and the dangers of moral and spiritual growth. In this first anagnorisis [recognition], Othello realizes that he has lived so far in a sphere of spontaneous bravery and natural honesty, but he assumes without any further questionings that his love has gained him easy access to the sphere of moral awareness, of high spiritual existence.

In fact, he assumes that his super-ego has materialised, suddenly and without tears. Hence, of course, the impressive self-assurance of his demeanour in circumstances which would be most embarrassing to any man gifted with more accurate self-knowledge.

This first anagnorisis is soon followed by another one, in which Othello achieves some sort of recognition of what has become of him after his faith in Desdemona has been shattered. The short speech he utters then marks a new step forward in his progress to self-knowledge:

I had been happy, if the general camp,  
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell! . . .  
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!  
[III. iii. 345–50, 357]

The spontaneous outcry of the first three lines results from Othello's disturbed awareness that the new world he has entered into is one of (to him) unmanageable complexity. He is now facing a *new* kind of chaos, and he wishes he could take refuge in an ignorance similar to his former condition of moral innocence. The pathetic childishness of this ostrich-like attitude is proportionate in its intensity to the apparent monolithic quality of his previous complacency.

What follows sounds like a *non sequitur*. Instead of this farewell to arms, we might have expected some denunciation of the deceitful aspirations that have led him to this quandary, coupled, maybe, with a resolution to seek oblivion in renewed military activity. But we may surmise that his allusion to "the general camp" [III. iii. 345], reminding him of his "occupation", turns his mind away from his immediate preoccupations. The transition occurs in the line

Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
[III. III. 348]

which carries ambivalent implications. The content he has now lost is not only the "absolute content" his soul enjoyed as a result of his love for Desdemona: it is also the content he had known previously, at the time when he could rejoice in his "unhoused free condition" [I. ii. 26]. This was the content of innocence and spontaneous adjustment to life. There is no recovering it, for, in this respect, he reached a point of no return when he glimpsed the truly chaotic nature of that state of innocence.

The fact that Othello starts talking about himself in the third person is of considerable significance. G. R. Elliott has noticed [in *Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello*] that the words have "a piercing primitive appeal: he is now simply a name". Besides, in this sudden ejaculation, there is a note of childish self-pity that reminds one of the first lines of the speech. But the main point is that it marks the occurrence of a deep dichotomy in Othello's consciousness of himself. As he had discarded his former self as an emblem of "chaos", so now he discards the super-ego that he thought had emerged into actual existence as a result of his love. It is as if that man known by the name of Othello was different from the one who will be speaking henceforward. The Othello of whom he speaks is the happy husband of Desdemona, the civilized Christian, the worthy Venetian, the illusory super-ego; but he is also the noble-spirited soldier and the natural man who guesses at heaven. That man has now disappeared, and the "I" who speaks of him is truly the savage Othello\* the barbarian stripped of his wishful thinking, who gives himself up to jealousy, black magic and cruelty, the man who coarsely announces that he will "chop" his wife "into messes", the man who debases his magnificent oratory by borrowing shamelessly from Iago's lecherous vocabulary.

Thus Othello, whom love had brought from pre-rational, pre-moral satisfaction and adjustment to life to moral awareness and a higher form of "content", is now taken from excessive complacency and illusory happiness to equally excessive despair and nihilism. These are his steps to self-knowledge. That they should



drive him to such alternative excesses gives the measure of his lack of judgment.

From the purely psychological point of view of character-analysis, critics have always found it difficult satisfactorily to account for Othello's steep downfall. That it would have been easy, as Robert Bridges wrote [in his essay "The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare"], for Shakespeare "to have provided a more reasonable ground for Othello's jealousy", is obvious to all reasonable readers. The fact that Othello's destruction occurs through the agency of Iago has induced the critics in the Romantic tradition to make much of what [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge has called Iago's "superhuman art", which, of course, relieves the Moor of all responsibility and deprives the play of most of its interest on the ethical and psychological level. More searching analyses, however, have shown that Iago is far from being a devil in disguise. And T. S. Eliot [in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"] has exposed the Moor as a case of *bovarysme*, or "the human will to see things as they are not", while Leo Kirschbaum [in the December 1944 ELH] has denounced him as "a romantic idealist, who considers human nature superior to what it actually is".

For our examination of *Othello* as a study in the relationships between the intellect and the moral life, it is interesting to note that the ultimate responsibility for the fateful development of the plot rests with a flaw in Othello himself. There is no "reasonable ground" for his jealousy; or, to put it somewhat differently, Shakespeare did not choose to provide any "reasonable" ground for it. The true motive, we may safely deduce, must be unreasonable. Yet, I find it difficult to agree that the Moor "considers human nature superior to what it actually is": this may be true of his opinion of Iago, but Desdemona is really the emblem of purity and trustworthiness that he initially thought her to be. Nor can we justifiably speak of his "will to see things as they are not" (though these words might actually fit Desdemona); in his confusion and perplexity there is no opportunity for his will to exert itself in any direction. The basic element that permits Othello's destiny to evolve the way it does is his utter inability to grasp the actual. If we want to locate with any accuracy the psychological origin of what F. R. Leavis [in his essay "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero"] has called his "readiness to respond" to Iago's fiendish suggestions, we cannot escape the conclusion that his gullibility makes manifest his lack of rationality, of psychological insight and of mere common sense, and that it is a necessary product of his undeveloped mind.

Othello has to choose between trusting Iago and trusting Desdemona. This is the heart of the matter, put in the simplest possible terms. The question, then, is: why does he rate Iago's honesty higher than Desdemona's? If it is admitted that Iago is not a symbol of devilish skill in evil-doing, but a mere fallible villain, the true answer can only be that Othello does not know his own wife.

More than a century of sentimental criticism based on the Romantic view of Othello as the trustful, chivalrous and sublime lover, has blurred our perception of his feeling for Desdemona. The quality of his "love" has recently been gone into with unprecedented thoroughness by G. R. Elliott, who points out that the Moor's speech to the Duke and Senators [I. iii] shows that "his affection for her, though fixed and true, is comparatively superficial". Othello sounds, indeed, curiously detached about Desdemona. His love is clearly subordinated, at that moment, to his soldierly pride. If he asks the Duke to let her go to Cyprus with him, it is because she wants it, it is "to be free and bounteous to her mind" [I. iii. 265]. In the juxtaposition of Desdemona's and Othello's speeches about this, there is an uncomfortable suggestion that his love is not at all equal to hers, who "did love the Moor to live with him" [I. iii. 248], and that he is not interested in her as we feel he ought to be. At a later stage the same self-centredness colours his vision of Desdemona as the vital source of his soul's life and happiness: his main concern lies with the "joy" [II. i. 184], the "absolute content" [cf. II. i. 191], the salvation [III. iii. 90–91] of his own soul, not with Desdemona as a woman in love, a human person. It lies with his love and the changes his love has wrought in him, rather than with the object of his love. It is not surprising, then, that he should know so little about his wife's inner life as to believe the charges raised by Iago.

On the other hand, his attitude to Desdemona is truly one of idealization, but in a very limited, one . might even say philosophical, sense. Coleridge wrote [in his *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets*] that "Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence". But Coleridge failed to stress the most important point, which is that this belief is mistaken. Desdemona is *not* "impure and worthless", she has *not* fallen from the heaven of her native innocence. Othello is unable to recognize this, and his failure is thus primarily an intellectual failure.

His attitude to Desdemona is different from that of the "romantic idealist" who endows his girl with qualities which she does not possess. Desdemona does have all the qualities that her husband expects to find in her. What matters to him, however, is not Desdemona as she is, but Desdemona as a symbol, or, in other words, it is his vision of Desdemona.

In his Essay on *Man*, Ernst Cassirer has the following remark about the working of the primitive mind:

In primitive thought, it is still very difficult to differentiate between the two spheres of being and meaning. They are constantly being confused: a symbol is looked upon as if it were endowed with magical or metaphysical powers.

That is just what has happened to Othello: in Desdemona he has failed to differentiate between the human being and the angelic symbol. Or rather, he has overlooked the woman in his preoccupation with the angel. She is to him merely the emblem of his highest ideal, and their marriage is merely the ritual of his admission into her native world, into her spiritual sphere of values. Because he is identifying "the two spheres of being and meaning", he is possessed by the feeling that neither these values nor his accession to them have any actual existence outside her: his lack of psychological insight is only matched by his lack of rational power.

The Neo-Platonic conceit that the lover's heart and soul have their dwelling in the person of the beloved is used by Othello in a poignantly literal sense [IV. ii. 57–60]. If she fails him, everything fails him. If she is not pure, then purity does not exist. If she is not true to his ideal, that means that his ideal is an illusion. If it can be established that she does not belong to that world in which he sees her enshrined, that means that there is no such world. She becomes completely and explicitly identified with all higher spiritual values when he says:

If she be false, O! then heaven mocks itself!  
[III. iii. 278]

Hence the apocalyptic quality of his nihilism and despair.

The fundamental tragic fault in the Moor can therefore be said to lie in the shortcomings of his intellect. His moral balance is without any rational foundation. He is entirely devoid of the capacity for abstraction. He fails to make the right distinction between the sphere of meaning, of the abstract, the ideal, the universal, and the sphere of being, of the concrete, the actual, the singular.

When Othello is finally made to see the truth, he recognizes the utter lack of wisdom [V. ii. 344] which is the mainspring of his tragedy, and, in the final anagnorisis, he sees himself for what he is: a "fool" [V. ii. 323]. The full import of the story is made clear in Othello's last speech, which is so seldom given the attention it merits that it may be well to quote it at some length:

I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice: then, must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a rurban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
 And smote him, thus. (Stabs himself)  
 [V. ii. 340–56]

One may find it strange that Shakespeare should have introduced at the end of Othello's last speech this apparently irrelevant allusion to a trivial incident in the course of which the Moor killed a Turk who had insulted Venice. But if we care to investigate the allegorical potentialities of the speech, we find that it is not a mere fit of oratorical self-dramatization: it clarifies the meaning of the play as a whole. There is a link between the pearl, the Venetian and Desdemona: taken together, they are an emblem of beauty, moral virtue, spiritual richness and civilized refinement. And there is a link between the "base Indian", the "malignant Turk" and Othello himself: all three are barbarians: all three have shown themselves unaware of the true value and dignity of what lay within their reach. Othello has thrown his pearl away, like the Indian. In so doing, he has insulted, like the Turk, everything that Venice and Desdemona stand for. As the Turk "traduced the State" [V. ii. 354], so did Othello misrepresent to himself that heaven of which Desdemona was the sensuous image.

S. L. Bethell [in *Shakespeare Survey* 5 (1952)] has left us in no doubt that the manner of Othello's death was intended by Shakespeare as an indication that the hero is doomed to eternal damnation. Such a view provides us with a suitable climax for this tragedy. Othello has attained full consciousness of his barbarian nature; yet, even that ultimate flash of awareness does not lift him up above his true self. He remains a barbarian to the very end, and condemns his own soul to the everlasting torments of hell in obeying the same primitive sense of rough-handed justice that had formerly prompted him to kill Desdemona . . . (pp. 100–06)

Albert Gerard, " 'Egregiously an Ass', The Dark Side of the Moor: A View of Othello's Mind," in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production*, Vol. 10, 1957, pp. 98–106.

### Wyndham Lewis

[Lewis wrote in a deliberately provocative style and outside the mainstream of Shakespearean criticism. The majority of his work on Shakespeare is included in his unusual study *The Lion and the Fox* (1927). In the following excerpt from that work, Lewis argues that Othello depicts "the race of men at war with the race of titans" and that the gods have predetermined that Iago, the petty Everyman, will triumph over the grandeur of Othello. The critic assesses the Moor as the most typical of Shakespeare's colossi, or giants, "because he is the simplest" and emphasizes his pure, guileless, generous nature and the childlike, defenseless quality of his soul. Lewis considers Iago "no great devil," but instead claims that he represents an ordinary, average, little man.]

Of all the colossi, Othello is the most characteristic, because he is the simplest, and he is seen in an unequal duel throughout with a perfect specimen of the appointed enemy of the giant—the representative of the race of men at war with the race of titans. . . . He is absolutely defenceless: it is as though he were meeting one of his appointed enemies, disguised of course, as a friend, for the first time. He seems possessed of no instinct by which he might scent his antagonist, and so be put on his guard.

So, at the outset, I will present my version of Othello; and anything that I have subsequently to say must be read in the light of this interpretation. For in Othello there is nothing equivocal, I think; and the black figure of this child-man is one of the poles of Shakespeare's sensation.

Who that has read Othello's closing speech can question Shakespeare's intentions here at least? The overwhelming truth and beauty is the clearest expression of the favour of Shakespeare's heart and mind. Nothing that could ever be said would make us misunderstand what its author meant by it. Of all his ideal giants this unhappiest, blackest, most "perplexed" child was the one of Shakespeare's predilection.

The great spectacular "pugnacious" male ideal is represented perfectly by Othello; who was led out to the slaughter on the Elizabethan stage just as the bull is thrust into the Spanish bullring. Iago, the *taurobolus* [bull catcher] of this sacrificial bull, the little David of this Goliath, or the little feat-gilded *espada* [matador], is for Shakespeare nothing but Everyman, the Judas of the world, the representative of the crowds around the crucifix, or of the ferocious crowds at the *corrida* [bull fight], or of the still more abject roman crowds at the mortuary games. Othello is of the race of Christs, or of the race of "bulls"; he is the hero with all the magnificent helplessness of the animal, or all the beauty and ultimate resignation of the god. From the moment he arrives on the scene of his execution, or when his execution is being prepared, he speaks with an unmatched grandeur and beauty. To the troop that is come to look for him, armed and snarling, he says: "Put up your bright swords or the dew will rust them!" [I. ii. 59]. And when at last he has been brought to bay he dies by that significant contrivance of remembering how he had defended the state when it was traduced, and in reviving this distant blow for his own demise. The great words roll on in your ears as the curtain falls:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once. . . .  
[V. il. 352]

Iago is made to say:

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,  
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature.  
[II. i. 288-89]

But we do not need, this testimony to feel, in all our dealings with this simplest and grandest of his creations, that we are meant to be in the presence of an absolute purity of human guilelessness, a generosity as grand and unaffected, although quick and, "being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme" [V. ii. 345-46], as deep as that of his divine inventor.

There is no utterance in the whole of Shakespeare's plays that reveals the nobleness of his genius and of its intentions in the same way as the speech with which Othello closes:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know it.  
No more of that. I prayyou, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice: then, must you speak  
Of one that loved, not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one, whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,  
Richer than all his tribe; of one, whose subdued eyes,. . .  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
And say, besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian, and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him—thus.  
[V. ii. 338–48, 350–56]

And it is the speech of a military hero, as simple-hearted as Hotspur [in *Richard III* and *I Henry IV*]. The tremendous and childlike pathos of this simple creature, broken by intrigue so easily and completely, is one of the most significant things for the comprehension of Shakespeare's true thought. For why should so much havoc ensue from the crude "management" of a very ordinary intriguer? It is no great devil that is pitted against him: and so much faultless affection is destroyed with such a mechanical facility. He is a toy in the hands of a person so much less real than himself; in every sense, human and divine, so immeasurably inferior.

*And say besides, that in Aleppo once.*

This unhappy child, caught in the fatal machinery of "Shakespearian tragedy," just as he might have been by an accident in the well-known world, remembers, with a measureless pathos, an event in the past to his credit, recalled as an afterthought, and thrown in at the last moment, a poor counter of "honour," to set against the violence to which he has been driven by the whisperings of things that have never existed.

And it is we who are intended to respond to these events, as the Venetian, Lodovico, does, when he apostrophizes Iago, describing him as:

More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!  
[V. ii. 362]

The eloquence of that apostrophe is the measure of the greatness of the heart that we have seen attacked and overcome. We cannot take that as an eloquent outburst only: it was an expression of the author's conviction of the irreparable nature of the offence, because of the purity of the nature that had suffered. The green light of repugnance and judgment is thrown on to the small mechanical villain at the last. (pp. 190–93)

Wyndham Lewis, "Othello as the Typical Colossus," in his *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare*, 1927. Reprint by Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1955, pp. 190–98.

» [Back to Section Index](#)  
» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Iago

A.C. Bradley, in the first excerpt, closely investigates Iago's character by examining his soliloquies. Finding that the motives of hatred and ambition inadequately account for Iago's actions, Bradley stresses the importance of the character's sense of superiority and his self-interest in determining his behavior. In the second excerpt, Henry Warnken examines the relationship between Iago and Othello, determining that while Iago's evil corrupts Othello, the potential for evil already lurked within the Moor—Iago merely frees his capacity for evil.

### A. C. Bradley

[Bradley closely investigates Iago's character by examining his soliloquies. Finding that the motives of hatred

*and ambition inadequately account for Iago's actions, Bradley stresses the importance of the character's sense of superiority and his self-interest in determining his behavior. Iago's ego, wounded by the denial of promotion, demands satisfaction, and his schemes and manipulations allow him to reestablish his sense of power and dominance over others. Bradley also finds that Iago is motivated by a love of excitement and by his perception of himself as an artist. He derives great pleasure from the successful execution of his complex and dangerous intrigues. The critic concludes that Iago's evil is comprehensible and therefore human rather than demonic.]*

[Let us] consider the rise of Iago's tragedy. Why did he act as we see him acting in the play? What is the answer to that appeal of Othello's:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil  
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?  
[V. ii. 301–021]

This question Why? Is the question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? Is *the* question about Hamlet. Iago refused to answer it; but I will venture to say that he *could* not have answered it, any more than Hamlet could tell why he delayed. But Shakespeare knew the answer, and if these characters are great creations and not blunders we ought to be able to find it too.

Is it possible to elicit it from Iago himself against his will? He makes various statements to Roderigo, and he has several soliloquies. From these sources, and especially from the latter, we should learn something. For with Shakespeare soliloquy generally gives information regarding the secret springs as well as the outward course of the plot; and, moreover, it is a curious point of technique with him that the soliloquies of his villains sometimes read almost like explanations offered to the audience. Now, Iago repeatedly offers explanations either to Roderigo or to himself. In the first place, he says more than once that he 'hates' Othello. He gives two reasons for his hatred. Othello has made Cassio lieutenant; and he suspects, and has heard it reported, that Othello has an intrigue with Emilia. Next there is Cassio. He never says he hates Cassio, but he finds in him three causes of offence: Cassio has been preferred to him; he suspects him too of an intrigue with Emilia; and, lastly, Cassio has a dally beauty in his life which makes Iago ugly. In addition to these annoyances he wants Cassio's place. As for Roderigo, he calls him a snipe, and who can hate a snipe? But Roderigo knows too much; and he is becoming a nuisance, getting angry, and asking for the gold and jewels he handed to Iago to give to Desdemona. So Iago kills Roderigo. Then for Desdemona: a fig's-end for her virtue! but he has no ill-will to her. In fact he 'loves' her, though he is good enough to explain, varying the word that his 'lust' is mixed with a desire to pay Othello in his own coin. To be sure she must die, and so must Emilia and so would Bianca if only the authorities saw things in their true light; but he did not set out with any hostile design against these persons.

Is the account which Iago gives of the causes of his action the true account? The answer of the most popular view will be, 'Yes. Iago was, as he says, chiefly incited by two things, the desire of advancement, and a hatred of Othello due principally to the affair of the lieutenancy. These are perfectly intelligible causes; we have only to add to them unusual ability and cruelty, and all is explained. Why should Coleridge and Hazlitt and Swinburne go further afield?' [see Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor; William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*; and Algernon Charles Swinburne's *A Study of Shakespeare*]. To which last question I will at once oppose these: If your view is correct, why should Iago be considered an extraordinary creation; and is it not odd that the people who reject it are the people who elsewhere show an exceptional understanding of Shakespeare?

The difficulty about this popular view is, in the first place, that it attributes to Iago what cannot be found in the Iago of the play. Its Iago is impelled by *passions*, a passion of ambition and a passion of hatred; for no ambition or hatred short of passion could drive a man who is evidently so clear-sighted, and who must

hitherto have been so prudent, into a plot so extremely hazardous. Why, then, in the Iago of the play do we find no sign of these passions or of anything approaching to them? Why, if Shakespeare meant that Iago was impelled by them, does he suppress the signs of them? Surely not from want of ability to display them. The poet who painted Macbeth and Shylock [in *The Merchant of Venice*] understood his business. Who ever doubted Macbeth's ambition or Shylock's hate? And what resemblance is there between these passions and any feeling that we can trace in Iago? The resemblance between a volcano in eruption and a nameless fire of coke; the resemblance between a consuming desire to hack and hew your enemy's flesh, and the resentful wish, only too familiar in common life, to inflict pain in return for a slight. Passion, in Shakespeare's plays, is perfectly easy to recognise. What vestige of it, of passion unsatisfied or of passion gratified, is visible in Iago? None: that is the very horror of him. He has less passion than an ordinary man, and yet he does these frightful things. The only ground for attributing to him, I do not say a passionate hatred, but anything deserving the name of hatred at all, is his own statement, 'I hate Othello'; and we know what his statements are worth.

But the popular view, beside attributing to Iago what he does not show, ignores what he does show. It selects from his own account of his motives one or two, and drops the rest; and so it makes everything natural. But it fails to perceive how unnatural, how strange and suspicious, his own account is. Certainly he assigns motives enough; the difficulty is that he assigns so many. A man moved by simple passions due to simple causes does not stand fingering his feelings, industriously enumerating their sources, and groping about for new ones. But this is what Iago does. And this is not all. These motives appear and disappear in the most extraordinary manner. Resentment at Cassio's appointment is expressed in the first conversation with Roderigo, and from that moment is never once mentioned again in the whole play. Hatred of Othello is expressed in the First Act alone. Desire to get Cassio's place scarcely appears after the first soliloquy, and when it is gratified Iago does not refer to it by a single word. The suspicion of Cassio's intrigue with Emilia emerges suddenly, as an after-thought, not in the first soliloquy but the second, and then disappears for ever. Iago's 'love' of Desdemona is alluded to in the second soliloquy; there is not the faintest trace of it in word or deed either before or after. The mention of jealousy of Othello is followed by declarations that Othello is infatuated about Desdemona and is of a constant nature, and during Othello's sufferings Iago never shows a sign of the idea that he is now paying his rival in his own coin. In the second soliloquy he declares that he quite believes Cassio to be in love with Desdemona. It is obvious that he believes no such thing, for he never alludes to the idea again, and within a few hours describes Cassio in soliloquy as an honest fool. His final reason for ill-will to Cassio never appears till the Fifth Act.

What is the meaning of all this? Unless Shakespeare was out of his mind, it must have a meaning. And certainly this meaning is not contained in any of the popular accounts of Iago.

Is it contained then in Coleridge's word "motive-hunting"? Yes, 'motive-hunting' exactly answers to the impression that Iago's soliloquies produce. He is pondering his design, and unconsciously trying to justify it to himself? He speaks of one or two real feelings, such as resentment against Othello, and he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings, such as resentment against Othello, and he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings. But these are not enough for him. Along with them, or alone, there come into his head, only to leave it again, ideas and suspicions, the creations of his own baseness or uneasiness, some old, some new, caressed for a moment to feed his purpose and give it a reasonable look, but never really believed in, and never the main forces which are determining his action. In fact, I would venture to describe Iago in these soliloquies as a man setting out on a project which strongly attracts his desire, but at the same time conscious of a resistance to the desire, and unconsciously trying to argue the resistance away by assigning reasons for the project. He is the counterpart of Hamlet, who tries to find reasons for his delay in pursuing a design which excites his aversion. And most of Iago's reasons for action are no more the real ones than Hamlet's reasons for delay were the real ones. Each is moved by forces which he does not understand; and it is probably no accident that these two studies of states psychologically so similar were produced at about the same period.

What then were the real moving forces of Iago's action? Are we to fall back on the idea of a 'motiveless malignity;' that is to say, a disinterested love of evil, or a delight in the pain of others as simple and direct as the delight in one's own pleasure? Surely not. I will not insist that this thing or these things are inconceivable, mere phrases, not ideas; for, even so, it would remain possible that Shakespeare had tried to represent an inconceivability. But there is not the slightest reason to suppose that he did so. Iago's action is intelligible; and indeed the popular view contains enough truth to refute this desperate theory. It greatly exaggerates his desire for advancement, and the ill-will caused by his disappointment, and it ignores other forces more important than these; but it is right in insisting on the presence of this desire and this ill-will, and their presence is enough to destroy Iago's claims to be more than a demi-devil. For love of the evil that advances my interest and hurts a person I dislike, is a very different thing from love of evil simply as evil; and pleasure in the pain of a person disliked or regarded as a competitor is quite distinct from pleasure in the pain of others simply as others. The first is intelligible, and we find it in Iago. The second, even if it were intelligible, we do not find in Iago.

Still, desire of advancement and resentment about the lieutenancy, though factors and indispensable factors in the cause of Iago's action, are neither the principal nor the most characteristic factors. To find these, let us return to our half-completed analysis of the character. Let us remember especially the keen sense of superiority, the contempt of others, the sensitiveness to everything which wounds these feelings, the spite against goodness in men as a thing not only stupid but, both in its nature and by its success, contrary to Iago's nature and irritating to his pride. Let us remember in addition the annoyance of having always to play a part, the consciousness of exceptional but unused ingenuity and address, the enjoyment of action, and the absence of fear. And let us ask what would be the greatest pleasure of such a man, and what the situation which might tempt him to abandon his habitual prudence and pursue this pleasure. Hazlitt and Mr. Swinburne do not put this question, but the answer I proceed to give to it is in principle theirs.

The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved, secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. And the moment most dangerous to such a man would be one when his sense of superiority had met with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced by resentment, while at the same time he saw an opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the very persons who had affronted it. Now, this is the temptation that comes to Iago. Othello's eminence, Othello's goodness, and his own dependence on Othello, must have been a perpetual annoyance to him. At any time he would have enjoyed befooling and tormenting Othello. Under ordinary circumstances he was restrained, chiefly by self-interest, in some slight degree perhaps by the faint pulsations of conscience or humanity. But disappointment at the loss of the lieutenancy supplied the touch of lively resentment that was required to overcome these obstacles; and the prospect of satisfying the sense of power by mastering Othello through an intricate and hazardous intrigue now became irresistible. Iago did not clearly understand what was moving his desire; though he tried to give himself reasons for his action, even those that had some reality made but a small part of the motive force; one may almost say they were no more than the turning of the handle which admits the driving power into the machine. Only once does he appear to see something of the truth. It is when he uses the phrase '*to plume up my will in double knavery*' [I. iii. 393–94].

To 'plume up the will,' to heighten the sense of power or superiority—this seems to be the unconscious motive of many acts of cruelty which evidently do not spring chiefly from ill-will, and which therefore puzzle and sometimes horrify us most. It is often this that makes a man bully the wife or children of whom he is fond. The boy who torments another boy, as we say, 'for no reason,' or who without any hatred for frogs tortures a frog, is pleased with his victim's pain, not from any disinterested love of evil or pleasure in pain, but mainly because this pain is the unmistakable proof of his own power over his victim. So it is with Iago. His thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction. What fuller satisfaction could it find than the consciousness that he is the master of the General who has undervalued him and of the rival who has been preferred to him; that these worthy people, who are so successful and popular and stupid, are mere puppets in his hands, but living



puppets, who at the motion of his finger must contort themselves in agony, while all the time they believe that he is their one true friend and comforter? It must have been an ecstasy of bliss to him. And this, granted a most abnormal deadness of human feeling, is, however horrible, perfectly intelligible. There is no mystery in the psychology of Iago; the mystery lies in a further question, which the drama has not to answer, the question why such a being should exist.

Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power is, I think, the strongest of the forces that drive him on. But there are two others to be noticed. One is the pleasure in an action very difficult and perilous and, therefore, intensely exciting. This action sets all his powers on the strain. He feels the delight of one who executes successfully a feat thoroughly congenial to his special aptitude, and only just within his compass; and, as he is fearless by nature, the fact that a single slip will cost him his life only increases his pleasure. His exhilaration breaks out in the ghastly words with which he greets the sunrise after the night of the drunken tumult which has led to Cassio's disgrace, 'By the mass, 'tis morning. Pleasure and action make the hours seem short' [II. iii. 378–79]. Here, however, the joy in exciting action is quickened by other feelings. It appears more simply elsewhere in such a way as to suggest that nothing but such actions gave him happiness, and that his happiness was greater if the action was destructive as well as exciting. We find it, for instance, in his gleeful cry to Roderigo, who proposes to shout to Brabantio in order to wake him and tell him of his daughter's flight:

Do, with like timorous accent and dire yell  
As when, by night and negligence, the fire  
Is spied in populous cities.  
[I. i. 75–7]

All through that scene; again, in the scene where Cassio is attacked and Roderigo murdered; everywhere where Iago is in physical action, we catch this sound of almost feverish enjoyment. His blood, usually so cold and slow, is racing through his veins.

But Iago, finally, is not simply a man of action; he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation. 'He is,' says Hazlitt, 'an amateur of tragedy in real life; and, instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters or long-forgotten incidents, he takes the bolder and more dangerous course of getting up his plot at home, casts the principal parts among his nearest friends and connections, and rehearses it in downright earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution.' Mr. Swinburne lays even greater stress on this aspect of Iago's character, and even declares that 'the very subtlest and strongest component of his complex nature' is 'the instinct of what Mr. [Thomas] Carlyle would call an inarticulate poet' And those to whom this idea is unfamiliar, and who may suspect it at first sight of being fanciful, will find, if they examine the play in the light of Mr. Swinburne's exposition, that it rests on a true and deep perception, will stand scrutiny, and might easily be illustrated. They may observe, to take only one point, the curious analogy between the early stages of dramatic composition and those soliloquies in which Iago broods over his plot, drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work. Here at any rate Shakespeare put a good deal of himself into Iago. But the tragedian in real life was not the equal of the tragic poet. His psychology, as we shall see, was at fault at a critical point, as Shakespeare's never was. And so his catastrophe came out wrong, and his piece was ruined.

Such, then, seem to be the chief ingredients of the force which, liberated by his resentment at Cassio's promotion, drives Iago from inactivity into action, and sustains him through it. And, to pass to a new point, this force completely possesses him; it is his fate. It is like the passion with which a tragic hero wholly identifies himself, and which bears him on to his doom. It is true that, once embarked on his course, Iago could not turn back, even if this passion did abate; and it is also true that he is compelled, by his success in convincing Othello, to advance to conclusions of which at the outset he did not dream. He is thus caught in his own web, and could not liberate himself if he would. But, in fact, he never shows a trace of wishing to do so,

not a trace of hesitation, of looking back, or of fear, any more than of remorse; there is no ebb in the tide. As the crisis approaches there passes through his mind a fleeting doubt whether the deaths of Cassio and Roderigo are indispensable; but that uncertainty, which does not concern the main issue, is dismissed, and he goes forward with undiminished zest. Not even in his sleep—as in Richard's before his final battle—does any rebellion of outraged conscience or pity, or any foreboding of despair, force itself into clear consciousness. His fate—which is himself—has completely mastered him: so that, in the later scenes, where the improbability of the entire success of a design built on so many different falsehoods forces itself on the reader, Iago appears for moments not as a consummate schemer, but as a man absolutely infatuated and delivered over to certain destruction.

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices—such as ingratitude and cruelty—which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect. In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive. How is it then that we can bear to contemplate him; nay, that, if we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? Henry the Fifth tells us:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,  
Would men observingly distil it out;  
[Henry V, IV. i. 4–51]

but here, it maybe said, we are shown a thing absolutely evil, and—what is more dreadful still—this absolute evil is united with supreme intellectual power. Why is the representation tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism?

To these questions it might at once be replied: Iago does not stand alone; he is a factor in a whole; and we perceive him there and not in isolation, acted upon as well as acting, destroyed as well as destroying. But, although this is true and important, I pass it by and, continuing to regard him by himself, I would make three remarks in answer to the questions.

In the first place, Iago is not merely negative or evil—far from it. Those very forces that moved him and made his fate—sense of power, delight in performing a difficult and dangerous action, delight in the exercise of artistic skill—are not at all evil things. We sympathise with one or other of them almost every day of our lives. And, accordingly, though in Iago they are combined with something detestable and so contribute to evil, our perception of them is accompanied with sympathy. In the same way, Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things; the perfect man would possess them. And certainly he would possess also Iago's courage and self-control, and, like Iago, would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world. All this goes to evil ends in Iago, but in itself it has a great worth; and, although in reading, of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror.

All this, however, might apparently co-exist with absolute egoism and total want of humanity. But, in the second place, it is not true that in Iago this egoism and this want are absolute, and that in this sense he is a thing of mere evil. They are frightful, but if they were absolute Iago would be a monster, not a man. The fact is, he tries to make them absolute and cannot succeed; and the traces of conscience, shame and humanity, though faint, are discernible. If his egoism were absolute he would be perfectly indifferent to the opinion of others; and he clearly is not so. His very irritation at goodness, again, is a sign that his faith in his creed is not

entirely firm; and it is not entirely firm because he himself has a perception, however dim, of the goodness of goodness. What is the meaning of the last reason he gives himself for killing Cassio:

He hath a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly?  
[V. i. 19–20]

Does he mean that he is ugly to others? Then he is not an absolute egoist. Does he mean that he is ugly to himself? Then he makes an open confession of moral sense. And, once more, if he really possessed no moral sense, we should never have heard those soliloquies which so clearly betray his uneasiness and his unconscious desire to persuade himself that he has some excuse for the villainy he contemplates. These seem to be indubitable proofs that, against his will, Iago is a little better than his creed, and has failed to withdraw himself wholly from the human atmosphere about him. And to these proofs I would add, though with less confidence, two others. Iago's momentary doubt towards the end whether Roderigo and Cassio must be killed has always surprised me. As a mere matter of calculation it is perfectly obvious that they must; and I believe his hesitation is not merely intellectual, it is another symptom of the obscure working of conscience or humanity. Lastly, is it not significant that, when once his plot has begun to develop, Iago never seeks the presence of Desdemona; that he seems to leave her as quickly as he can [III. iv. 138]; and that, when he is fetched by Emilia to see her in her distress [IV. ii. 110], we fail to catch in his words any sign of the pleasure he shows in Othello's misery, and seem rather to perceive a certain discomfort, and, if one dare say it, a faint touch of shame or remorse? This interpretation of the passage, I admit, is not inevitable, but to my mind (quite apart from any theorising about Iago) it seems the natural one. And if it is right, Iago's discomfort is easily understood; for Desdemona is the one person concerned against whom it is impossible for him even to imagine a ground of resentment, and so an excuse for cruelty—There remains, thirdly, the idea that Iago is a man of supreme intellect who is at the same time supremely wicked. That he is supremely wicked nobody will doubt; and I have claimed for him nothing that will interfere with his right to that title. But to say that his intellectual power is supreme is to make a great mistake. Within certain limits he has indeed extraordinary penetration, quickness, inventiveness, adaptiveness; but the limits are defined with the hardest of lines, and they are narrow limits. It would scarcely be unjust to call him simply astonishingly clever, or simply a consummate master of intrigue. But compare him with one who may perhaps be roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how small and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of Napoleon's military achievements, and much more incapable of his political constructions. Or, to keep within the Shakespearean world, compare him with Hamlet, and you perceive how miserably close is his intellectual horizon; that such a thing as a thought beyond the reaches of his soul has never come near him; that he is prosaic through and through, deaf and blind to all but a tiny fragment of the meaning of things. Is it not quite absurd, then, to call him a man of supreme intellect?

And observe, lastly, that his failure in perception is closely connected with his badness. He was destroyed by the power that he attacked, the power of love; and he was destroyed by it because he could not understand it; and he could not understand it because it was not in him. Iago never meant his plot to be so dangerous to himself. He knew that jealousy is painful, but the jealousy of a love like Othello's he could not imagine, and he found himself involved in murders which were no part of his original design. That difficulty he surmounted, and his changed plot still seemed to prosper. Roderigo and Cassio and Desdemona once dead, all will be well. Nay, when he fails to kill Cassio, all may still be well. He will avow that he told Othello of the adultery, and persist that he told the truth, and Cassio will deny it in vain. And then, in a moment, his plot is shattered by a blow from a quarter where he never dreamt of danger. He knows his wife, he thinks. She is not over-scrupulous, she will do anything to please him, and she has learnt obedience. But one thing in her he does not know—that she loves her mistress and would face a hundred deaths sooner than see her fair fame darkened. There is genuine astonishment in his outburst 'What! Are you mad?' [V. ii. 194] as it dawns upon him that she means to speak the truth about the handkerchief. But he might well have applied himself the words she flings at Othello,

O gull! O dolt!  
As ignorant as dirt!  
[V. ii. 163–64]

The foulness of his own soul made him so ignorant that he built into the marvellous structure of his plot a piece of crass stupidity.

To the thinking mind the divorce of unusual intellect from goodness is a thing to startle; and Shakespeare clearly felt it so. The combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is more than startling, it is frightful. It is rare, but it exists; and Shakespeare represented it in *Iago*. But the alliance of evil like *Iago*'s with supreme intellect is an impossible fiction; and Shakespeare's fictions were truth. (pp. 222–37)

A C. Bradley, "Othello," in his *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, second edition, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1905, pp. 207–42.

### Henry L. Warnken

[Warnken examines the relationship between *Iago* and *Othello*, determining that while *Iago*'s evil corrupts *Othello*, the potential for evil already lurked within the Moor—Iago merely frees his capacity for evil. *Iago*'s strengths—his ability to quickly exploit situations, his knowledge of human nature, and his innate cunning—exploit *Othello*'s weaknesses—sensitivity, pride, insecurity, and shortsightedness. The critic finds that *Othello* gradually adopts *Iago*'s speech patterns and world view, and by the play's end *Iago* "penetrates *Othello*'s character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing as he does so, the evil already present within *Othello*." Thus, *Othello* ends the play dominated by the emotions over which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he had control. By succumbing to these emotions, he destroys himself.]

*Iago* is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain. He is hate and evil made physical, the most fully developed member of a group of characters that includes Richard III, Edmund [in *King Lear*], and Goneril and Regan [in *King Lear*]. Bernard Spivack, in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, has suggested that *Iago* is the medieval Vice given new life by Shakespeare [the Morality Play character Vice would tempt the protagonist].

Such a judgment is correct; but it would be misleading to conclude that *Othello* is the embodiment of goodness and trust, and therefore, nothing more than the innocent foil for the other's wickedness. *Othello* is, in fact, the source of *Iago*'s diabolical inspiration. He contains within himself the potential for evil. *Iago* could never have succeeded in his designs were it not for *Othello*'s dark suspicions, his predisposition to mistrust and the sense of inferiority it breeds.

*Iago* repeatedly tries to justify his actions with the same kind of superficial self-righteousness manifested by *Othello*. He feels and thinks that he has been cheated, betrayed, made a fool of by others—but he has no proof. His arguments for revenge are built on suspicion, feeling, emotion, and impulse. He has no proof, for example, that *Othello*—or Cassio—has committed adultery with Emilia; he acts merely on suggestion and rationalization. In this he is remarkably similar to *Othello*, who also has a habit of accepting things at face value, acting on impulse and suspicion rather than on proof. Because he acts and thinks in this manner, *Othello*—like *Iago*—comes to accept the notion that mankind is moved only by the most selfish motives. Desdemona herself assumes this aspect in his eyes. *Othello* comes to see her with the same warped and corrupted imagination displayed by *Iago*.

*Iago* is clearly evil; but as the play progresses, *Othello* appears less good, less innocent than the public image of the opening scenes may lead one to suppose. *Iago* may manipulate *Othello*, but *Othello* is no mere puppet. By the middle of the play, his thoughts and feelings echo *Iago*'s. He is the medium through which *Iago* works his diabolical plans—but he is a willing medium, responding to *Iago*'s suggestions with the same kind of pseudo-rational justification *Iago* has insisted on as an excuse for his own actions. *Iago* thus emerges as a

*projection* of Othello, the full embodiment of the weaknesses and limitations of the other. Iago feeds on the errors that result from Othello's self-deception; but he himself is deceived in his vision of the world. For him, mankind is corruptible; love is a mere illusion; women are inferior beings. He acts on these assumptions in the same way that Othello acts on his warped vision of love, trust, and honor. Both act on a false set of premises. The relationship thus established is reflected and magnified, as will be seen, in the imagery and verbal patterns of the play.

One of the most striking of Iago's characteristics is his uncanny ability to take advantage of the situations and opportunities presented to him. His strategy, of course, does not succeed completely: Cassio remains alive, and Iago himself is captured and his plot revealed. On the whole, however, he is unbelievably successful. In his hands, the slightest shred of gossip, hearsay, or overheard conversation becomes a dangerous catalyst, a catalyst that intensifies Othello's reaction to the facts and situations Iago places before him.

Othello is easy prey for Iago because he is extremely sensitive and prone to anger. So long as his confidence remains unshaken, he has complete command of a situation. This is clearly seen when Brabantio, Roderigo, and others, threaten to attack him:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew—will rust them.  
Good signior, you shall more command with years  
Than with your weapons.  
[I. ii. 59–61]

When moved to anger, however, he tends to ignore reason—as when he comes upon the drunken Cassio, following the street fight engineered by Iago:

Now, by heaven,  
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,  
And passion, having my best judgment collied,  
Assays to lead the way.  
[II. iii. 204–07]

Iago has already understood Othello's tendency to react without reason to a situation which touches him personally. He understands well that Othello's emotions feed and wax violent on doubt, that he seems to have a built-in capacity for self-deception, which can be utilized by Iago for his own ends. He works especially on Othello's doubt—planted in him by Brabantio's statements early in the play—that perhaps his marriage to Desdemona is a perversion of nature; he plays on Othello's ignorance of life and people, especially in Venice, and on his inability to distinguish between appearance and reality.

The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.  
[I. iii. 399–400]

Othello's judgment of Iago is, of course, the best illustration of this. "He holds me well" [I. iii. 390], Iago reminds us, but he himself is a much severer judge:

. . . little godliness I have . . .  
[I. ii. 9]

... oft my jealousy Shapes faults that are not. .  
[III. iii. 147–48]

I am a very villain. . . .  
[IV. i. 125]

The recognition of the contradiction between appearance and reality in his own case gives Iago the confidence he needs to turn fiction into fact and convince Othello that fair is foul. He correctly evaluates Othello's love for Desdemona:

Our General's wife is now the General. . . for. . . he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces.  
[II. iii. 314–15, 316–18]

His soul is ... enfetter'd to her love  
[II. iii. 345]

—but he has no doubt about his ability to undermine that reality. He succeeds very often with a mere hint—as, for example, the suggestion that Desdemona can not possibly escape the corruption for which the Venetian women (he implies) are notorious:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands.  
[III. iii. 202–03]

In the eyes of others, Iago is understandably "brave," "honest," and "just," for he invariably calls upon the virtues of others to effect their fall. It is the soldier's fearlessness, his impulsive response in critical situations, which he plays upon to bring Othello to ruin. Defending his marriage to Desdemona before the Duke and others in a council chamber, Othello reminds them that

. . . since these arms of mine had seven years' pith  
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd  
Their dearest action in the tented field;  
And little of this great world can I speak  
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.  
[I. iii. 83–7]

He has known the battlefield and war since early youth. He is a soldier, and therefore accustomed to hardship and cruelty. He himself admits that he can withstand hardship, and may even be stimulated by it:

I do agnize  
A natural and prompt alacrity  
I find in hardness.  
[I. iii. 231–33]

He is also accustomed to acting quickly and making decisions rapidly, concentrating on the present state of affairs, rather than future consequences. In Act II Scene 3, when he puts an end to the drunken brawl going on when he enters, Othello immediately demands the name of the man who started it. The first man he asks is Iago. Iago lies, saying he does not know. Finding no answer here, he turns to Cassio himself. Again, no answer, so he turns to Montano. But he, too, refuses to point a finger, and consequently, Othello learns nothing. He knows what he wants, but he lacks the reason to show him the means to obtain it. It never once enters his mind that he could see each man personally and perhaps in this manner arrive at something reasonably close to the truth. But as the situation stands at that moment, he cannot understand it; his "passion" begins "to lead the way" and his "best judgment" is obscured [II. iii. 206–07]. The whole matter is

"monstrous." The proof he finally does accept is Iago's; he makes no real attempt to hear Cassio. Othello's actions here reflect his military manner of thinking. On the field, when danger and uncertainty threaten, one must gather facts as quickly as possible, reach a decision, and implement it. Such a method of handling things may succeed brilliantly when employed on the battleground; but when used in every-day life, when used with respect to one's wife and friends, the results may be disastrous. Physically, Othello is living like a civilian; mentally, like a soldier. When a domestic problem arises he tries to solve it as if he were on the battlefield. Cassio is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Cassio is dismissed. Desdemona is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Desdemona is murdered.

Othello is quick to make decisions and act upon them, and so is Iago. Although Iago makes some attempt to reason out his plans, his reasoning nevertheless comes in flashes; a moment's reason for a moment's advancement. As soon as his plan "is engendr'd," he acts quickly so that he will "Dull not device by coldness and delay" [II. iii. 388]. Later in the play, going to plant Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room, Iago senses that "this may do something" [III. iii. 324]. Like Othello, Iago also knows war. He has served with Othello at Rhodes and Cyprus and has, of course, "... in the trade of war . . . slain men" [I. ii. 1]. Although Othello seems to seek understanding rather than destruction, he emerges, in the course of the play, as the image of Iago even in this respect; in his very attempts to understand Desdemona, he will destroy her.

The focal point of the entire play is Act in Scene 3, and it is here that Othello begins to show most clearly his Iago-like traits, attitudes, and verbal patterns. Watching Cassio leave Desdemona, Iago sets things in motion by exclaiming, "Ha! I like not that" [II. iii. 35]. Iago speaks it but Othello thinks it, for he adds, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" [in. iii. 37]. Iago answers that it could not have been Cassio, for he would never "steal away so guilty-like" [in. iii. 39]. And Othello replies, "I do believe 'twas he" [in. iii. 40], beginning to confirm the doubts he has in his own mind.

Later, defending Cassio (and trying to help regain Othello's friendship), Desdemona describes him as the one "that came a-wooing with you" [III. iii. 71]. Iago catches this and quickly makes use of it:

Iago. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,  
Know of your love?  
Oth. He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?  
Iago. But for a satisfaction of my thought;  
No further harm.  
[III. iii. 94-8]

Iago here is the doubt in Othello's own mind. Othello suspects Desdemona and Cassio, and although Iago asks the questions, they are merely "echoes" of Othello's own thoughts. He does not realize how closely Iago's words match his thoughts, but he does recognize that what is in Iago's mind is a "monster," a thing "too hideous to be shown" [III. iii. 108]. Whenever Othello cannot understand something it is "monstrous"; he describes the drunken brawl in Act II Scene 3 in the same way; and later, when Iago tells him of Cassio's supposed dream (in which he makes love to Desdemona) that, too, is "monstrous." Whatever Othello cannot comprehend he sees as some hideous creation; but the creation, in a very real sense, is his own. It is his because in demanding proof, he has already accepted the implications in Iago's veiled accusations. He will accept anything that seems like proof, or rather, anything that "honest" Iago offers him as proof. Interestingly enough, he always demands proof from others: he never seeks it on his own initiative.

Iago is very close to Othello in the sense that he, too, never really obtains proof for the things he fears or believes others have done to him. He lacks proof, for example, that Othello and Cassio have committed adultery with Emilia. And he obviously lacks proof for many of the things he tells Othello about Desdemona. It is perhaps this tendency to accept things blindly, on a kind of perverted faith, that enables Iago to reach

Othello so readily with the most far-fetched insinuations and concocted stories.

The more twisted and perverted the information Iago gives to Othello, the more Othello seems to believe it. He still fails to understand Iago: "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty" [III. iii. 118]. Iago, true, honest friend that he is, warns Othello to "beware . . . of jealousy" for it is a "green-ey'd monster" [III. iii. 165-66]. His thoughts are running parallel to Othello's and he uses one of the words Othello originally borrowed from him when he denotes something as monstrous.

Othello, constantly hindered by his limited understanding of others, cannot determine where he stands:

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;  
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.  
I'll have some proof. . . .  
Would I were satisfied!  
[III. iii. 384-86. 390]

And Iago answers:

I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion.  
[III. iii. 391]

He has seen Othello like this before, in Act II Scene 3, when he could not comprehend the reasons for the street fight:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule.  
[II. iii. 205]

The Moor's passion runs over his reason, and he asks Iago:

Give me a living reason she's disloyal.  
[III. iii. 409]

Once again he wants proof, but asks for it, instead of trying to obtain it on his own. Instead of using his own reasoning, he lets Iago do it for him. Iago now goes on to describe how he heard Cassio murmuring in his sleep about his love-making to Desdemona Othello, still incapable of understanding fully what is happening, utters his old cry "O monstrous! monstrous!" and Iago replies, "Nay, this was but his dream" [III. iii. 427]. But in Othello's mind this dream "denoted a foregone conclusion" [III. iii. 428]. Othello accepts the dream partly because in his aroused emotional state he will believe virtually anything, and partly because Iago, by describing the dream, makes audible the thoughts in Othello's own mind. Though Iago may tell the dream, Othello has already thought it; the dream, in sense, is his own. Iago confirms Othello's own doubts and suspicions.

Iago can easily strengthen such doubts because the two men are so similar. For example, Iago often speaks in a brusque, harsh manner; now Othello speaks in the same way:

I'll tear her all to pieces.  
[m. iil. 4311]

I would have him [Cassio] nine years a-killing!  
[IV. 1. 178]



Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be  
damn'd tonight; for she shall not live.  
[IV. i. 181–82]

Othello can speak this way of Desdemona, because he is ready to "see" that what Iago has been telling him is "true." What Iago tells him merely reinforces his own doubts and fears; proof is not really necessary since Iago's words merely echo Othello's own dark judgments. As the identity between the designs of Iago and the conclusions of the Moor becomes more explicit, Othello comes to sound like Iago more and more. In Act I, Iago had exclaimed:

I have't! It is engendered! Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.  
[I. 111. 403–04]

And later:  
Divinity of hell!  
When devils will the blackest sins put on.  
[II. iii. 350–51]

Othello soon swears revenge in much the same terms:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!  
[III. iii. 447]

Othello, full of "bloody thoughts," now demands "blood, blood, blood" [in. iil. 457, 451], the very word used by Iago on a number of earlier occasions.

Othello's thoughts are now as evil as Iago's, and to think like Iago is to speak like him. Now, in his bewilderment and the confusion brought on by his lack of reason and discrimination, Othello takes evil for good and good for evil. Desdemona has become a "devil" and Iago is now Othello's "lieutenant" And when Iago utters, "I am your own for ever" [III. iii. 479], he echoes the earlier words that Othello spoke to him: "I am bound to thee for ever" [ffl. iii. 213].

Iago continues to work upon Othello, and in Act IV Scene 1, he plans to have Cassio talk about Bianca, and Othello, hiding and listening, will think that he is speaking about Desdemona. But before Othello goes behind his hiding place, Iago urges him to "mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns that dwell in every region of his [Cassio's] face" [IV. i. 82–3]. Othello accepts Iago's words because they reflect what he has already conceived in his own mind. He agrees with Iago's picture of Cassio because he himself pictures the former officer in the same way. After the conversation between Iago, Cassio, and later, Bianca, Othello emerges from his hiding place completely convinced of Cassio's guilt: "How shall I murder him, Iago?" [IV. i. 170]. His emotions are so intense and his desire for vengeance so strong, that he forgets that Iago has already promised to kill Cassio:

Oth. Within these three days let me hear thee say That Cassio's not alive.

Iago. My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request.  
[II. iii. 472–74]

He has, for the moment, lost all love for Desdemona, for his "heart is turn'd to stone" [IV. i. 182]. Iago at this point reinforces practically everything Othello says. The two seem in perfect accord. Iago's success is assured; all he does from this time on is to elaborate the evil Othello has come to acknowledge within himself. The

following dialogue is, in a sense, the workings of one mind:

Oth. I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!

Iago. O, 'tis foul in her.

Oth. With mine officer!

Iago. That's fouler.

Oth. Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago!

Iago. Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.

Oth. Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!  
[IV. i. 200–10]

Parallels such as this between Iago and Othello are reinforced by the imagery and verbal echoes found in the play. One of the primary patterns of imagery is that of animals, and more than half of these images are Iago's. The animals which he mentions are usually small and repellent in some way, whether it be for their ugliness, filth, cunning, or some other quality the reader normally associates with them. Iago's use of such images can be seen when he and Roderigo come at night to awake Brabantio in order to tell him that his daughter has eloped with Othello and is by now married to him. Othello's happiness must be destroyed by constant irritation, and he tells Roderigo:

Plague him with flies.  
[I. i. 711]

Animal and sexual images are combined in his conversation with Brabantio:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe.  
[I. i. 88–9]

. . . you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse.  
[I. i. 111–12]

. . . your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.  
[I. i. 116–17]

With such terms Iago reveals his firm conviction that all love is lust. By using imagery of this kind he provides a powerful emotional accompaniment for his arguments, which are designed to convince Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago plays upon Othello's fear that Desdemona might some day deceive him as she did her father. He manages to twist Othello's view of his own marriage until it appears to be nothing more than a perversion of nature, and corrupts his image of Desdemona, until she seems to be nothing but a prostitute.

These patterns of animal, sexual and other images are highly important, because they underline the close similarities that exist between the two apparently different personalities. It is perhaps even more significant to note that such patterns of imagery abound in Iago's speech, initially, but are gradually absorbed and taken over

by Othello as his mind and speech become twisted and corrupted by the evil rising up within him. Throughout the early part of the play, Iago makes repeated references to animals, most of them possessing cruel and despicable traits. He mentions the fox, with its selfish cunning, the ass, with its stupidity, the baboon, the locust, the spider, the wolf, the fly, the goat, and others. Through images such as these, he suggests stealth and evil, lechery, disease, and disaster. Such imagery reinforces Iago's view of life and people as things governed by animal instinct. Iago's world is similar in this respect to that in *King Lear*, where human beings are reduced to nothing more than a dog-eat-dog relationship. From Act III Scene 3 onward Othello joins Iago in the habit of seeing and describing things in terms of repulsive or dangerous animals. He echoes the earlier references to the goat, toad, dog, asp, worm, raven, bear, crocodile, monkey, and fly. ... The progression is clear: the images used by Iago are gradually taken over by Othello. Words such as monster, monstrous, and beast follow a similar pattern, as does another group of images which refers to parts of the human body—blood, arms, ear, heart, lips, brain, legs. In the beginning of the play it is Iago who uses these images most frequently. But in the third act, Othello becomes then—chief spokesman, and remains so for the rest of the play. (pp. 1–12)

Readers of the play cannot help noticing the fact that Iago very often speaks of things in terms of imagery that contains connotations of, or outright references to, sex, lust, lechery, and prostitution. Iago is the first to use terms such as these, but when Othello begins to see and value things as Iago does, he, too, begins to use these images and, when he does, uses them with greater frequency than does Iago. The frequency and the shift of these images from one character to the other reinforces the pattern we have already denned ... In *Shakespeare Survey* 5, S. L. Bethell discusses the shift in the use of diabolical images such as hell, devil, fiend, and damn, noting that Iago introduces these references, but Othello takes them over as evil increases its hold upon him. (pp. 12–13)

All of these patterns of imagery and verbal echoes elaborate and stress the change in Othello and the release of the latent evil within him, Iago being the spark that ignites it. But whereas Iago recognizes evil for what it is, Othello must regard it as a good in order to accept it; for him it becomes a means for obtaining justice and destroying those whom he considers corrupt—Cassio and Desdemona.

By the end of the play, Othello has become a man dominated and possessed by the very emotions which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he was not subject to. He thought he had perfect control over his emotions; he felt he could handle any situation, and often said so with colorful imagery:

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it  
Without a prompter.  
[I. ii. 82–3]

He proclaimed himself free from the heated passions of youth:

—the young affects  
In me defunct—  
[I. iii. 263–64]

But his actions in the course of the play show that he does not have control over his emotions, and that he does not have the ability to handle any situation. The image he has of himself is as erroneous as his understanding of others. His ability to weigh and evaluate character and action is limited; and when caught in the mire of something he cannot comprehend, he often asks a series of questions, begging assistance, and ends with a half-pleading,

Give me answer to't.  
[II. iii. 196]

And, of course, Iago is always ready to trigger Othello's buried passion and evil. Iago, like Othello, gropes about and makes hasty use of the materials he finds—gossip, hearsay, rumor—and with these tries and succeeds in giving direction and assistance to Othello's stumbling thoughts. He is a diabolic crutch, providing the assistance and direction that Othello craves. It is only at the very end of the play that Othello comes to have some insight into his own hidden motivations:

[A man] not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme.  
[V. ii. 345–46]

By succumbing to the emotions he thought he could control, he destroys himself, of course; by yielding to passion and weak reasoning he murders Desdemona, whose death shatters his "soul's joy." But his realization that he had "lov'd not wisely, but too well" [V. ii. 344] applies to the trusted, "honest" Iago, as well as to Desdemona. His passions aroused, his reason fled and left him "perplex'd in the extreme." When he did try to rationalize, he built his arguments on the trusted words of Iago, which merely reinforced the suspicions and fears which he had already admitted into his own heart. He found true what Iago said about Desdemona because he himself thought it before Iago uttered it. Thus, he took Iago's words as a confirmation of truth. Iago understood this perfectly well, for as he himself explains:

I told him what I thought, and told no more  
Than what he found himself was apt and true.  
[V. ii. 176–77]

Iago's powerful hold over Othello is proof of Othello's own potential for evil. Iago penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing, as he does so, the evil already present within Othello. As Iago's weakly conceived ideas and convictions are given expression, Othello accepts them as his own, alienating himself more and more from the human and the rational. In his failure to understand himself, Desdemona, and Iago, he paves the way for his own ruin in the same way that Iago comes to destroy himself through his self-absorption. The destruction of one signals, in fact the destruction of the other. Having destroyed Othello, Iago promises that he "never will speak word" [V. ii. 304] of what he has done, much less why it has been done. With Othello dead, the rich field upon which Iago's malice and hate had taken root and flourished now lies wasted and destroyed. The public, dignified, military figure presented to us at the beginning of the play has fallen prey to what it tried most to believe was never there, conquered in large measure by its own weaknesses and delusions. And Iago, the forger of the perfect phrase, the subtle lie, the devastating hint, the man to whom language was both a mirror and a tool of personality, sentences himself to eternal silence, (pp. 13–15)

Henry L. Warnken, "Iago as a Projection of Othello," in *Shakespeare Encomium*, edited by Anne Paolucci, The City College, 1964, pp. 1–15.

» [Back to Section Index](#)  
» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Desdemona

In this excerpt, S. N. Garner elucidates Desdemona's character, maintaining that Shakespeare carefully balanced the other characters' accounts of her as goddess or whore to present a complex portrait. Garner points out that Desdemona's liveliness and assertiveness are confirmed by her marriage to Othello and that these positive traits become a fatal liability.

### S. N. Garner

[Garner elucidates Desdemona's character, maintaining that Shakespeare carefully balanced the other characters' accounts of her as goddess or whore to present a complex portrait. Othello's sensual view is countered by Brabantio's idealized concept in Act I and Roderigo and Cassio's romanticized vision is opposed by Iago's coarse innuendo in Act II. Garner then points out that Desdemona's liveliness and assertiveness are confirmed by her marriage to Othello and that these positive traits become a fatal liability. Finally, the critic ends with a discussion of Desdemona's powerlessness in the face of her husband's accusations, which leads to her death.]

As Desdemona prepares to go to bed with Othello in Act IV, scene iii of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the following conversation occurs between her and Emilia:

Emilia. Shall I go fetch your night-gown?

Desdemona. No, unpin me here. This Lodovico is a proper man.

Emilia. A very handsome man.

Desdemona. He speaks well.

Emilia. I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

[IV. ii. 34–9]

Surely this is startling dialogue coming as it does between the brothel scene and the moment when Desdemona will go to her wedding with death. An actress or director would certainly have to think a great deal about how these lines are to be spoken and what they are to reveal of Desdemona's character. But a reader or critic is not so hard pressed, and he may, if it suits him, simply skip over them. This is precisely what most critics do.

Robert Heilman is representative. In his lengthy book on the play, *Magic in the Web*, he does not discuss the passage. One reason for this omission, of course, is that he, like most critics, is mainly interested in Othello and Iago. Nevertheless, since he uses the New Critics' method of close reading—underscoring images, habits of diction, and grammatical structure—it is peculiar that when he treats Desdemona's character, dealing in two instances with Act IV, scene iii specifically (pp. 189–90, 208–10), he fails to notice these lines. A partial explanation for this failure is that he sustains his interpretation of Othello and Iago and the theme of the play by insisting on Desdemona's relative simplicity and diverges from other critics who make her "overintricate." More significantly, however, the passage is difficult to square with his contention that in the last act Desdemona "becomes. . . the saint," a representation of "the world of spirit." (p. 233)

Many critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello. The notion is so tenacious that when Desdemona even appears to threaten it, they cannot contemplate her character with their usual care and imagination.

At what appears to be the other extreme is such a critic as W. H. Auden, one of the few who notices the passage and sees it as a significant revelation of Desdemona's character. Viewing her cynically partly on account of it, he remarks: "It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, she speaks with admiration of Ludovico [sic] and then turns to the topic of adultery. . . . It is as if she had suddenly realized that she had made a mesalliance [marriage with with a person of inferior social rank] and that the sort of man she ought to have married was someone of her own class and colour like Ludovico. Given a few more years of Othello and of Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover" ["The Alienated City: Reflections on 'Othello'," *Encounter* 17 (1961)]. But isn't Auden finally making the same assumption as the others? Doesn't his cynical and easy dismissal of Desdemona imply that he has expected her to be perfect? If she is not, then she must be corrupt. Isn't this Othello's mistake exactly? Either Desdemona is pure or she is

the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88].

The poles of critical opinion are exactly those presented in the play. On the one hand is the view of Desdemona the "good" characters have; on the other is the negative vision of her that Iago persuades Othello to accept. At a time when we have become especially careful about adopting any single perspective of a character as the dramatist's or the "right" perspective, why do many critics now simply accept one extreme view of Desdemona or the other? I can only assume that they share a vision Shakespeare presents as limited.

Desdemona's character is neither simple nor any more easily defined than Iago's or Othello's. Any effort to describe it must take into account all of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values. Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, as he gives Juliet with Romeo and Cleopatra with Antony, he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play, as he does Cordelia [in *King Lear*] or Hermione [in *The Winter's Tale*]. She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. What happens to her matters because we see how it affects her as well as Othello. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago.

That Desdemona is neither goddess nor slut Shakespeare makes very clear. He evidently realized that he would have to defend his characterization of her more against the idealization of the essentially good characters than the denigration of the villain. Consequently, though he undermines both extremes, he expends his main efforts in disarming Desdemona's champions rather than her enemy. In her first two appearances, Shakespeare establishes her character and thus holds in balance the diverging views, but he goes out of his way to make her human rather than divine.

He carefully shapes Othello's account of Desdemona to counter Brabantio's initial description of her as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" [I. iii. 94–6]. Because Brabantio is unwilling to believe that Desdemona's "perfection so could err" [I. iii. 100] that she would elope with Othello, he accuses him of seducing her by witchcraft or drugs. In Othello's eloquent defense [I. iii. 127–69], he shows not only that Brabantio's accusations are false but also that it was Desdemona who invited his courtship. His description of her coming with "greedy ear" to "devour" his tales of cannibals, anthropophagi, and his own exploits suggests that she is starved for excitement and fascinated by Othello because his life has been filled with adventure. She loved him, he says, for the dangers he had passed. So far is Desdemona from being Brabantio's "maiden never bold" [I. iii. 94] that she gave Othello "a world of kisses" [I. iii. 159] for his pains and clearly indicated that she would welcome his suit:

She wished  
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,  
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
I should but teach him how to tell my story,  
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.  
[I. iii. 162–66]

The scene is carefully managed so as to create sympathy for both Othello and Desdemona. Because Desdemona initiates the courtship, Othello is absolutely exonerated of Brabantio's charge. His cautiousness acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a black man in Venetian society and is appropriate and even admirable. The Moor cannot be confident of Desdemona's attraction to him, and he undoubtedly knows that marrying him would isolate her from her countrymen. Recognizing Othello's reticence and undoubtedly its causes, Desdemona makes it clear she loves him but, at the same time, maintains a degree of indirection. Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem either shy or overly forward.

When Desdemona finally appears, she strengthens the image Othello has presented. Before the senators, she answers her father's charges forcefully and persuasively, without shyness or reticence. More significantly, it is she, and not Othello, who first raises the possibility of her going to Cyprus. Othello asks only that the senators give his wife "fit disposition" [I. iii. 236], but when the Duke asks her preference, Desdemona pleads:

If I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.  
[I. iii. 255–59]

Her wish not to be left behind as a "moth of peace" is a desire not to be treated as someone too fragile to share the intensity of Othello's military life. As though she might have overheard Brabantio tell Othello that she would not have run to his "sooty bosom" [I. ii. 69], she confirms her sexual attraction to him as well as her own sexuality by insisting that she wants the full "rites" of her marriage.

Shakespeare must have wanted to make doubly sure of establishing Desdemona's sensuality, for he underscores it the next time she appears. At the beginning of Act II, while she awaits Othello on the shore of Cyprus, her jesting with Iago displays the kind of sexual playfulness that we might have anticipated from Othello's description of their courtship.

As soon as Desdemona arrives at Cyprus, together with Emilia, Iago, and Roderigo, and is greeted by Cassio, she asks about Othello. Immediately a ship is sighted, and someone goes to the harbor to see whether it is Othello's. Anxious about her husband, Desdemona plays a game with Iago to pass the time; in an aside, she remarks, "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" [II. i. 121–22]. Their repartee grows out of a debate that Iago begins by accusing Emilia of talking too much. A practiced slanderer of women, he chides both his wife and Desdemona. Although Desdemona rebukes him, "O, fie upon thee, slanderer!" [II. i. 113], she asks him to write her praise. Instead he comments on general types of women:

Iago. If she be fair and wise: fairness and wit,  
The one's for use, the other useth it.  
Desdemona. Well praised. How if she be black and witty?  
Iago. If she be black, and thereto have a wit,  
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.  
Desdemona. Worse and worse!  
[II. i. 129–34]

Iago's "praises" commend women for what he might expect Desdemona to regard as faults, and none are without sexual overtones. Though Desdemona remarks that they "are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh f th' alehouse" [II. i. 138–39], they do not offend her and serve her well enough as a pastime for fifty-five lines, until Othello arrives.

Critics who take an extreme view of Desdemona see her pleasure in this exchange with Iago as a failure of Shakespeare's art. [M. R.] Ridley, for example, comments [in the Arden edition of *Othello*]: "This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. Desdemona's natural instinct must surely be to go herself to the harbour, instead of asking parenthetically whether someone has gone. Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap back-chat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way. All we gain from it is some further un-needed light on Iago's vulgarity." But this scene is unnatural for Ridley's Desdemona, not Shakespeare's. What the dramatist gives us here is an extension of the

spirited and sensual Desdemona that has been revealed in the first act. Her scene with Iago shows her to be the same woman who could initiate Othello's courtship and complain before the senators about the "rites" she would lose in Othello's absence. Her stance is similar to the one she will take later when she tries to coax Othello into reinstating Cassio. That the scene impedes the dramatic movement too long and that its humor is weak are perhaps legitimate criticisms; to suggest that it distorts Desdemona's character is surely to misunderstand her character.

Shakespeare makes a special effort to maintain the balance of the scene. He keeps Desdemona off a pedestal and shows her to have a full range of human feelings and capacities. Yet he is careful not to allow her to fail in feeling or propriety. The point of her aside is to affirm her concern for Othello as well as to show her personal need to contain anxiety and distance pain and fear. As we see how Desdemona acts under stress later in the play, it seems consistent with her character that she should want a distraction to divert her attention in this extremity. Shakespeare brings the exchange between Desdemona and Iago to a brilliant close as Othello enters and greets his "fair warrior." The sensual import of this moment and his address is surely heightened by what we have seen of Desdemona shortly before. Shakespeare's delicately poised portrayal of Desdemona to this point prepares us for the splendid antithesis between Iago and Cassio in the middle of the second act:

Iago. Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame. He  
hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove.  
Cassio. She's a most exquisite lady.  
Iago. And, I'll warrant her, full of game.  
Cassio. Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.  
Iago. What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.  
Cassio. An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.  
Iago. And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?  
Cassio. She is indeed perfection.  
[II. iii. 14–28]

Such a carefully counterpointed exchange invites us to adjust both views.

Iago distorts Desdemona's character by suppressing the side of it that Cassio insists on and emphasizing her sensuality. His suggestions that she is "full of game" and that her eye "sounds a parley to provocation" call up an image of a flirtatious and inconstant woman. Iago's view is clearly limited by his devious purpose and also by his cynical notions about human nature in general and women in particular.

But Cassio's view is limited as well. He idealizes Desdemona as much as her father did. It is evidently clear to Iago that his efforts to persuade Cassio of his vision will fail when he pronounces Desdemona "perfection," as had Brabantio before him" [I. iii. 100]. The extravagance of language Cassio uses earlier in describing Desdemona must also make his view suspect. For example, he tells Montano that Othello.

hath achieved a maid  
That paragon's description and wild fame;  
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,  
And in th' essential vesture of creation  
Does tire the ingener.  
[II. i. 61–5]

After the safe arrival of Desdemona and her companion in Cyprus, Cassio rhapsodizes:



Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,  
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,  
Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless keel,  
As having sense of beauty, do omit  
Their moral natures, letting go safely by  
The *divine* Desdemona  
[II. i. 68–73; italics added]

This idealization gives as false a picture of Desdemona as Iago's denigration of her. Cassio's lines in fact comment more on his character than on Desdemona's. To accept his view of Desdemona, as many have done, is as grievous a critical mistake as to accept Iago's.

Desdemona's liveliness, assertiveness, and sensuality are corroborated in her marrying Othello. The crucial fact of her marriage is not that she elopes but that she, a white woman, weds a black man. Though many critics focus on the universality of experience in *Othello*, we cannot forget the play's racial context. Othello's blackness is as important as Shylock's Jewishness [in *The Merchant of Venice*], and indeed the play dwells relentlessly upon it.

It is underscored heavily from the beginning. The first references to Othello, made by Iago to Roderigo, are to "the Moor" [I. i. 39, 57]. Roderigo immediately refers to him as "the thick-lips" [I. i. 66]. He is not called by name until he appears before the senators in scene ii when the Duke of Venice addresses him. He has been referred to as "the Moor" nine times before that moment.

Iago and Roderigo know they may depend on Brabantio's fears of black sexuality and miscegenation. When he appears at his window to answer their summons, Iago immediately cries up to him, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" [I. i. 88–9] and urges him to arise lest "the devil" make a grandfather of him. The tone intensifies as Iago harps on Othello's bestial sexuality. To the uncomprehending and reticent Brabantio he urges impatiently:

You'll have  
your daughter covered with a Barbary  
horse, you'll  
have your nephews neigh to you, you'll  
have coursers  
for cousins, and gennets for Germans.  
[I. i. 111–14]

Mercilessly, he draws a final image: "Your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" [I. i. 115–17]. The unimaginative and literal Roderigo adds that Desdemona has gone to the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" [I. i. 126]. (pp. 234–40)

Critics speculate about what Othello's marriage to Desdemona means for him but usually fail to consider what it means for her to marry someone so completely an outsider. What are we to make of Desdemona's choosing Othello rather than one of her own countrymen? Brabantio tells Othello that Desdemona has "shunned / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation" [I. ii. 66–7]. It seems incredible to him that, having done so, she should then choose Othello. But Shakespeare intends to suggest that the "curled darlings" of Italy leave something to be desired; the image implies preciousness and perhaps effeminacy. He expects us to find her choice understandable and even admirable.

Of all Desdemona's reputed suitors, we see only Roderigo. The easy gull of Iago and mawkishly lovesick, he is obviously not worthy of Desdemona. When Othello and Desdemona leave for Cyprus, Roderigo tells Iago,

"I will incontinently drown myself " [I. iii. 305], and we cannot help but assent to Iago's estimation of him as a "silly gentleman" [I. iii. 307]. Even Brabantio agrees that he is unsuitable, for he tells him, "My daughter is not for thee" [I. i. 98]. Only by comparing him to Othello does he find him acceptable.

The only other character who might be a suitor for Desdemona is Cassio. But it occurs to neither Cassio nor Desdemona that he should court her. Shakespeare makes him a foil to Othello and characterizes him so as to suggest what Desdemona might have found wanting in her countrymen. He is evidently handsome and sexually attractive. In soliloquy, where he may be trusted, Iago remarks that "Cassio's a proper man" [I. iii. 392] and that "he hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected—framed to make women false" [I. iii. 397–98]. Drawing Cassio as one who is "handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after" [II. i. 245–47], Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is most likely to be second after Othello in Desdemona's affections. In soliloquy again, Iago makes clear that he thinks Cassio loves Desdemona: "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe 't" [II. i. 286].

Though he is handsome and has all the surface graces, Cassio is wanting in manliness. Shakespeare certainly intends Cassio's inability to hold his liquor to undermine his character. He gives this trait mainly to comic figures, such as Sir Toby Belch [in *Twelfth Night*], or villains, like Claudius [in *Hamlet*). Once drunk, the mild-mannered Cassio is "full of quarrel and offense" [H. iii. 50]. His knowledge of his weakness [II. iii. 39–42] might mitigate it, but even aware of it, he succumbs easily. Though at first he refuses Iago's invitation to drink with the Cypriots, he gives in later with only a little hesitation to Iago's exclamation, "What, man! 'Tis anight of revels, the gallants desire it" [II. iii. 43–4]. His lack of discipline here and his subsequent behavior that disgraces him lend some credence to Iago's objections to Othello's preferring him as lieutenant. (pp. 241–42)

Desdemona's marrying a man different from Roderigo, Cassio, and the other "curled darlings" of Italy is to her credit. She must recognize in Othello a dignity, energy, excitement, and power that all around her lack. Since these qualities are attributable to his heritage, she may be said to choose him because he is African, black, an outsider. When she says she saw Othello's visage in his mind, she suggests that she saw beneath the surface to those realities that seemed to offer more promise of life. If the myth of black sexuality (which Othello's character denies at every turn) operates for Desdemona, as it does for some of the other characters, it can only enhance Othello's attractiveness for her as she compares him with the pale men around her.

Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. Brabantio in effect disowns her since he would not have allowed her to live with him after her marriage [I. iii. 240] if she had not been permitted to go with Othello to Cyprus. His last words are not to her, but to Othello, and they cut deep: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" [I. iii. 292–93]. Later we learn that Brabantio died of grief over the marriage [V. ii. 204–06]. We are to disapprove of Desdemona's deception no more than we are to disapprove of Juliet's similar deception of Capulet, or Hermia's of Egeus [in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*]. Shakespeare gives Brabantio's character a comic tinge so that our sympathies do not shift from Desdemona to him.

That her marriage separates her from society is implied because of the attitudes we hear expressed toward Othello, but it is also made explicit. Brabantio does not believe that Desdemona would have married Othello unless she had been charmed partially because of his sense that she will "incur a general mock" [I. ii. 68]. After Othello has insulted Desdemona, Emilia's question of Iago makes clear what lines have been drawn: "Hath she forsook . . . Her father and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore?" [IV. ii. 124–27]. Desdemona does not marry Othello ignorant of the consequences; when she pleads with the Duke to allow her to go to Cyprus, she proclaims:

That I love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world.  
[I. i. 248–50]

She knows her action is a "storm of fortunes." Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society is some measure of her capacity for love, even though her love is not based on complete knowledge. She does not see Othello clearly and cannot anticipate any of the difficulties that must necessarily attend his spirited life. Her elopement is more surely a measure of her determination to have a life that seems to offer the promise of excitement and adventure denied her as a sheltered Venetian senator's daughter.

Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries someone from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes.

At the beginning she unwittingly plays into Iago's hands by insisting that Othello reinstate Cassio immediately. On the one hand, she cannot know what web of evil Iago is weaving to trap her. On the other, her behavior in this matter is not entirely without fault. It is only natural that Desdemona should wish Cassio reinstated since he is her old friend and, except for Emilia, her only close friend on Cyprus. But her insistence is excessive. She assures Cassio that Othello "shall never rest" [in. iii. 22] until he promises to restore the lieutenant's position, and indeed, she makes sure that he never does. Yet her persistence does not seem necessary, for Emilia has assured Cassio earlier:

All will sure be well.  
The general and his wife are talking of it.  
And she speaks for you stoutly. The Moor replies  
That he you hurt is of great fame in Cyprus  
And great affinity, and that in wholesome wisdom  
He might not but refuse you. But he protests he loves you,  
And needs no other suitor but his likings  
To bring you in again.  
[III. i. 42–50]

Desdemona harps on her single theme playfully, teasingly. Her manner is no different from that which she took when she courted Othello or jested with Iago. Her vision seems not to extend beyond the range that allowed her to manage domestic life in Brabantio's quiet household.

As soon as Othello's jealousy and rage begin to manifest themselves, Desdemona's forthrightness and courage start to desert her. She can no longer summon up those resources that might help her. She is not as fragile as Ophelia [in *Hamlet*] she will not go mad. But neither is she as resilient or as alert to possibilities as Juliet, who was probably younger and no more experienced than she. Before Juliet takes the potion the Friar has prepared to make her appear dead, she considers whether he might have mixed a poison instead, since he would be dishonored if it were known he had married her to Romeo [IV. iii. 24–7]. She confronts the possibility of evil, weighs her own position, and takes the risk she feels she must. There is never such a moment for Desdemona.

Under the pressure of Othello's anger, Desdemona lies to him, by denying she has lost the handkerchief he gave her, and makes herself appear guilty. Her action is perfectly understandable. To begin with, she feels guilty about losing it, for she has told Emilia earlier that if Othello were given to jealousy, "it were enough / To put him to ill thinking" [III. iv. 28–9]. But more important, she lies out of fear, as her initial response to Othello indicates:

Why do you speak so startingly and rash?  
Othello. Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is it out o' th' way?  
Desdemona. Heaven bless us!  
[III. iv. 79–81]

Then she becomes defensive: "It is not lost. But what an if it were?" [III. iv. 83]. At this point Othello's demeanor must be incredibly frightening. Shortly before this moment he has knelt with Iago to vow vengeance against Desdemona if she proves unfaithful, and moments later, he is so enraged that he "falls in a trance" [IV. i. 43]. In this sudden crisis, latent fears of Othello that are inevitably part of Desdemona's cultural experience must be called into play. Her compounded terror destroys her capacity for addressing him with the courage and dignity that she had summoned in facing her father and the senators when they called her actions in question.

If Desdemona has wanted the heights of passion, she finds its depths instead. That she is simply bewildered and unable to respond more forcefully to Othello's subsequent fury is attributable to several causes. To begin with, his change is sudden and extreme. When Lodovico arrives from Venice and meets the raging Othello, he asks incredulously:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate  
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature  
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue  
The shot of accident nor dart of chance  
Could neither graze nor pierce?  
[IV. i. 264–68]

Noble Othello is like the flower that festers and smells far worse than weeds. Only Iago anticipates the full possibilities of his corruption.

But the most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her "noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are" [III. iv. 26–8]. Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: "Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" [in. iv. 29–30]. Though Emilia immediately suspects that Othello is jealous [III. iv. 98], Desdemona does not credit her suspicions since she "never gave him cause" [in. iv. 158]. Emilia tries to explain that jealousy is not rational and does not need a cause:

But jealous souls will not be answered so;  
They are not ever jealous for the cause,  
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster  
Begot upon itself, born on itself.  
[III. iv. 159–62]

Though Iago provokes Othello, his jealousy, as Emilia says, arises out of his own susceptibility. He has romanticized Desdemona, as she has him. Forced to confront the fact that she is human and therefore capable of treachery, he is threatened by his own vulnerability to her. If he cannot keep himself invulnerable by idealizing her, then he will do so by degrading her. His fears are heightened because he thinks his blackness, age, and lack of elegance make him less attractive sexually than Cas-sio.

Despite the worsening crisis, Desdemona will not be instructed by Emilia, nor will she alter her view of Othello so that she might understand and possibly confront what is happening. Her only defense is to maintain

an appalling innocence. The more she must struggle to keep her innocence in the face of the overwhelming events of the last two acts, the more passive and less able to cope she becomes. She must hold on to it for two reasons. First, nothing of her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabantio's home and society could have anticipated this moment, and nothing in her being can rise to meet it now. Therefore, she must close it out. Second, if she is deserted by her husband, there is nowhere for her to turn. Rather than suffer the terror and pain of her isolation, she must deny that it exists.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona from the beginning of Act IV until her death illustrates how finely and clearly he had conceived her character and how well he understood the psychology of a mind under pressure. As Iago's poison works and Othello becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt and increasingly madder with rage, Desdemona will become gradually more passive and continually frame means of escape in her imagination.

After the brothel scene, when Othello leaves calling Desdemona the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88] and throwing money to Emilia as to a madam, Desdemona is stunned. Emilia asks, "Alas, what does this gentleman conceive? / How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?"; Desdemona replies, "Faith, half asleep" [IV. ii. 95–71]. The action is too quick for her to be literally asleep; Othello has just that moment left. Rather, she is dazed; her mind simply cannot take in what it encounters. Almost at once she begins to look for ways out. Directing Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed [IV. ii. 105], she hopes to be able to go back in time, to recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they were newly married. Though she will subsequently assert that she approves of Othello's behavior, part of her will not approve and will continue to create fantasies to save herself.

Next, Desdemona begins to anticipate her death, directing Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die [IV. iii. 25–6] and singing the willow song. She not only foreshadows her death but also expresses an unconscious desire for it. Her preface to the song makes her wish clear:

My mother had a maid called Barbary.  
She was in love; and he she loved proved mad  
And did forsake her. She had a song of "Willow";  
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,  
And she died singing it. That song tonight  
Will not go from my mind; I have much to do  
But to go hang my head all at one side  
And sing it like poor Barbary.  
[IV. iii. 26–33]

That the song will not go from her mind and that she has "much to do" to keep from hanging her head and singing it suggest the insistence of a death wish. To express a desire for death here and to plead with Othello later to let her live is not inconsistent. Death wishes are more often hopes of finding peace and escape rather than real wishes to die. The song itself—quiet, soporific—promises calm in contrast to Othello's raging.

Just before Desdemona sings, she starts the conversation about Lodovico quoted at the beginning. That she thinks of Lodovico when she is undressing to go to bed with Othello suggests that she is still trying to find a way around the emergency of the moment. She admires Lodovico as "a proper man"—precisely the phrase Iago used to describe Cassio [I. iii. 392]—and as one who "speaks well," calling up those qualities that Cassio has and Othello lacks. Since the man Desdemona has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian and a madman, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico—a handsome, white man, with those attributes she recognizes as civilized. In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake.

Desdemona does not know the world, or herself, for that matter. Like Lear, she has been led to believe she is "ague-proof." At the end of Act IV Shakespeare makes it certain, if he has not before, that she is self-deceived and that there is a great discrepancy between what she unconsciously feels and what she consciously acknowledges. When Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would cuckold her husband "for all the world" [IV. iii. 67], Emilia plays with the question, answering, "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice" [IV. iii. 68–9]. Desdemona finally says she does not think "there is any such woman" who would [IV. iii. 83]. Her comment underscores her need to close out knowledge that might threaten her. Coming as it does after the passage about Lodovico, her remark can only emphasize her pitiable need to maintain an innocence that must inevitably court ruin.

Like Sleeping Beauty waiting for the prince's kiss, Desdemona is asleep when Othello comes. When he threatens her, the most she can do is plead for her life. Desdemona is not Hermione, who has the wisdom to know that if Leontes doubts her fidelity [in *The Winter's Tale*], she cannot convince him of her chastity by insisting on it. And unlike Hermione, Desdemona merely asserts her innocence rather than reproaches her husband, with whom the final blame must lie. She can only lament that she is "undone" [V. ii. 76] and beg for time. She acts differently from the heroine of *The Winter's Tale* not only because she is more fragile and less wise but also because her accuser is not a white man following at least the forms of justice in a court. Othello is a black man with rolling eyes [V. ii. 38] coming to do "justice" in her bedroom at night.

When Desdemona revives for a moment after Othello has stifled her, she affirms her guiltlessness [V. ii. 122] and to Emilia's asking who has "done this deed," she answers, "Nobody—I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord" [V. ii. 123–25]. Her answer is often thought of as an effort to protect Othello. Had Othello stabbed Desdemona, then the notion is plausible that she might pretend to have killed herself to save him. But Desdemona could not have smothered or strangled herself. I think her answer acknowledges instead her full responsibility for her marriage and its consequences. What her implied forgiveness of Othello means is unclear. Her remark of a moment before, "A guiltless death I die" [V. ii. 122], must be rendered with pain or anger, so her forgiveness may merely follow her old pattern of denying what she feels and acknowledging what she must; in other words, it may be unfelt. If her forgiveness is genuinely felt, however, it might suggest that Desdemona has come to see Othello with the prejudices of her countrymen and to regard him as acting according to a barbarian nature that will not allow him to act otherwise. She forgives him, then, as she would a child. Or at its best, her pardoning Othello means that she is finally capable of an ideal love, one that does not alter "when it alteration finds" or bend "with the remover to remove" [Sonnet 116]. But even if we see Desdemona as acting out of pure love, as most critics do, her triumph is undercut because she never confronts the full and unyielding knowledge in the face of which true love and forgiveness must maintain themselves. Furthermore, there is no ritual of reconciliation between Desdemona and Othello. Though Othello is by Desdemona's side when she forgives him, she uses the third person and speaks to Emilia.

Othello learns that he is wrong, that Iago, whom he trusted, has deceived him heartlessly, monstrously. But he never understands what in himself allowed him to become prey to Iago. The final truth for him is that he has thrown a pearl away. His suicide is a despairing act. He finally sees himself as unblessed and bestial—beyond mercy. Paradoxically, his only redemption must come through self-execution.

Othello is surely one of Shakespeare's bleakest tragedies. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello must fail. They do not know themselves, and they cannot know each other. Further, they never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance, and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago. We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense. Yet for all their terrible suffering, Desdemona and Othello are finally denied even that knowledge. (pp. 243–50)

S. N. Garner, "Shakespeare's Desdemona, " in *Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Reviews*, Vol. 9, 1976, pp. 233–52.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Selected Quotes

**Iago is most honest** (2.3) Othello, unaware of Iago's evil plans, comments on his honesty. This is most ironic of course, since Iago is the furthest thing from it. Shakespeare is able to increase the tension of the plot with short, simple statements like this one.

**Who steals my purse steals trash** (3.3.160) Iago has gotten Cassio drunk and Cassio has gotten himself fired as Othello's lieutenant. He mourns the loss of his reputation, which, if compared to the theft of a purse, is more valuable than gold.

**green-eyed monster** (3.3.166) Iago gives Othello very true advice in a sarcastic vein. Jealousy is compared to a 'green-eyed monster'. In the modern sense, the phrase is 'green with envy'.

**vale of years** (3.3.270) Some critics believe this to be a reference to the 23rd Psalm: 'Yea though I walk through the of the shadow of death'. In the modern sense, it has been corrupted to 'vale of tears', meaning a painful experience.

**Men should be what they seem;Or those that be not, would they might seem none** (3.3) Probably the most biting ironic words in the play, Iago plants the idea in Othello's mind that Cassio might be cavorting with Desdemona, and is not "what he seems". Of course, it is plainly Iago who is not what he seems. Shakespeare adroitly uses this technique of having his villains describe what is in reality their own treachery, even when they are apparently referring to someone else. This only adds to the chilling, calculating nature of Iago.

**foregone conclusion** (3.3.430) To Shakespeare, this phrase meant 'a previous experiment'. In the modern sense, it refers to something that has already been decided.

**pomp and circumstance** (3.3.54) These are the celebrations that would be held in Cyprus for the victory over the Turks. In the modern sense, it is frequently used to describe a very formal event, such as an inauguration or graduation.

**so sweet was never so fatal** (5.2.33) Othello is contemplating murdering Desdemona to save other men from her 'deceit'. Knowing how sweet Desdemona actually is means the real or spiritual death of a man.

**Some bloody passion shakes your very frame** (5.2) In the play's final scene, Othello, broken and defeated by his complete submittal to Iago's plan, prepares to kill Desdemona and demands she admit her unfaithfulness. Of course, she has no idea what he is talking about, and says as much in this quote — hoping in vain that his rage is not to be imminently directed at her.

**loved not wisely but too well** (5.2.45–46) Othello realises too late that he was wrong about Desdemona's infidelity, but the only fault he admits is that he listened to Iago.

**'tis the curse of service,Preferment goes by letter and affection** (1.1.45–46) In the first scene of Othello we

learn that Iago has been passed over in favor of Cassio for the position of Othello's lieutenant. This slight provides the motive for Iago's diabolical plan to wreak revenge on Othello. Here Iago complains that Cassio's elevation was based on favoritism, rather than traditional values of service and succession.

**And will as tenderly be led by the noseAs asses are** (1.3.45–46) At the close of Act I, Iago hatches his plan against Othello. The theme of appearance and reality figures prominently throughout the play; here Iago notes that Othello is not adept at distinguishing between the two — making him more likely to fall victim to Iago's scheme.

**Iago is most honest** (2.3.45–46) Othello, unaware of Iago's evil plans, comments on his honesty. This is most ironic of course, since Iago is the furthest thing from it. Shakespeare is able to increase the tension of the plot with short, simple statements like this one.

**Men should be what they seem;Or those that be not, would they might seem none** (3.3.45–46) Probably the most bitingly ironic words in the play, Iago plants the idea in Othello's mind that Cassio might be cavorting with Desdemona, and is not "what he seems". Of course, it is plainly Iago who is not what he seems. Shakespeare adroitly uses this technique of having his villains describe what is in reality their own treachery, even when they are apparently referring to someone else. This only adds to the chilling, calculating nature of Iago.

**Some bloody passion shakes your very frame** (5.2.45–46) In the play's final scene, Othello, broken and defeated by his complete submittal to Iago's plan, prepares to kill Desdemona and demands she admit her unfaithfulness. Of course, she has no idea what he is talking about, and says as much in this quote — hoping in vain that his rage is not to be imminently directed at her.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Suggested Essay Topics

### Act I, Scenes 1–3

1. Explain how Iago uses his power of persuasion with Roderigo, Brabantio, and Othello to create his scheme to undo the Moor.
2. Contrast what Iago says about Othello with what Othello reveals about himself through his own words.

### Act II, Scenes 1–3

1. Verbal irony is a dramatic technique by which characters say the opposite of what they mean. Identify examples of verbal irony and explain the difference between what is said and what is meant.
2. In Act II, Iago's scheme to undo Othello becomes more calculated and involves more victims. Explain the steps he takes to achieve his goal and how he traps his victims.

### Act III, Scenes 1–4

1. Identify characters and incidents which provide comic relief as the drama intensifies.
2. Trace the significance of Desdemona's handkerchief through Act III.

### Act IV, Scenes 1–3

1. Describe the changes that occur in Othello during the course of Act IV as Iago increases his attempts to



rouse Othello's jealousy.

2. Defend or refute this statement: Emilia's opinion about betrayal expresses a contemporary view of the relationship between the sexes.

### **Act V, Scenes 1 and 2**

1. Describe the rapid series of events which bring about Othello's demise.

2. Defend or refute this statement: Othello's suicide is an honorable act.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Sample Essay Outlines**

### **Topic #1**

Generally, irony is the literary technique that involves differences between appearance and reality, expectation and result, or meaning and intention. More specifically, verbal irony uses words to suggest the opposite of what is meant. In dramatic irony there is a contradiction between what a character says or thinks and what the audience knows to be true. Finally situational irony refers to events that occur which contradict the expectations of the characters, audience, or readers. Identify the various types of irony used in Othello and explain their significance to the plot.

### **Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: *In Shakespeare's Othello, verbal irony, dramatic irony, and situational irony are used to propel the action forward and to intensify the drama as it proceeds.*

#### **II. Act I**

- A. Iago tells Roderigo "I am not what I am."
- B. Iago tells Othello "I lack iniquity / Sometimes to do me service."
- C. Othello discusses how his merits will speak for themselves.
- D. Brabantio wants Othello to go to prison for eloping with Desdemona.
- E. The invasion of Cyprus by the Turkish fleet causes Othello's commission to the island.
- F. Brabantio's insistence on how Desdemona was beguiled by Othello versus Iago's beguiling of Othello.
- G. Othello's comments to the Duke that Iago "is of honesty and trust"

#### **III. Act II**

- A. The storm destroys the Turkish fleet off the coast of Cyprus.
- B. In the humorous praise of women, Iago pretends that he has difficulty imagining ways to praise the various women Desdemona mentions.
- C. Othello tells Desdemona "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy."

- D. Desdemona responds to Othello with “that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days grow!”
- E. Othello proclaims an evening of celebration of victory over the Turkish fleet and his marriage.
- F. Othello comments to Cassio, “Iago is most honest.
- G. Iago encourages Cassio to “have a measure to the health of black Othello.”
- H. Iago tells Othello that he would “rather have his tongue cut” from his mouth “than it should do offense to Michael Cassio.”
- I. Iago urges Cassio to ask Desdemona for help to get reinstated with Othello.

#### IV. Act III

- A. Iago tells Cassio that he will “devise a means to draw the Moor / Out of the way, that your converse and business / May be more free.
- B. Emilia says that the rift between Othello and Cassio “greives my husband / As if the cause were his.”
- C. Desdemona says to Cassio that “thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away.”
- D. Iago says to Othello, “My lord, you know I love you.”
- E. Iago states to Othello that “men should be what they seem; / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!”
- F. Othello comments that “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds” with reference to Iago.
- G. When Desdemona offers to bind Othello’s head with her handkerchief, it falls and Emilia picks it up.
- H. Othello tells Iago, “Thou hadst’t been better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath” after demanding visible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity.
- I. Othello tells Desdemona that to lose or give away the handkerchief “were such perdition / As nothing else could match.”
- J. Cassio gives Bianca the handkerchief for her to copy the design.

#### V. Act IV

- A. Iago instructs Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation he has with Cassio about Bianca.
- B. Bianca enters and chides Cassio for giving her the handkerchief.
- C. Lodovico delivers the letter recalling Othello to Venice and appointing Cassio in charge in Cyprus.
- D. Emilia says to Othello that “If any wretch have put his in your head” to “Let heaven requite it with the serpent’s curse.”
- E. Iago asks Desdemona “How comes this trick upon him?”
- F. Emilia suggests that “some eternal villain ...devised the slander.”
- G. Othello tells Desdemona to get “to bed on th’ instant

...dismiss your attendant there.”

H. Desdemona sings the “willow” song that preoccupied her mind all day.

#### VI. Act V

A. Roderigo fails to kill Cassio

B. Othello hears Cassio’s cries.

C. Iago kills Roderigo

D. Bianca enters the fracas and wants to know what is going on.

E. Iago tells Cassio “He that lies here...was my friend.”

F. Iago states that “guiltiness will speak, / Though tongues were out of use.”

G. Othello tells Desdemona that Cassio is dead.

H. Emilia tells Othello that Cassio killed Roderigo.

I. Iago’s final statement is “From this time forth I never will speak word.”

#### Topic #2

In literature, motivation refers to the reasons that explain or partially explain a character’s thoughts, feelings, actions, or behavior. Motivation results from a combination of personality and circumstances with which he or she must deal. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes the character of Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello as a “motiveless malignancy,” suggesting that he is a character whose motivation is pure evil. Discuss Iago in terms of the thoughts, feelings, actions, and behavior which result from his experiences.

#### Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Iago is a manifestation of evil from which emanates a malevolent force that grows wider and deeper, destroying everyone in its path as he reveals himself throughout the play.*

#### II. Act I

A. Roderigo responds to Iago with “Thou told’st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.”

B. Iago expresses his opinions as to why Michael Cassio was chosen as Othello’s lieutenant.

C. Iago comments that “In following him, I follow but myself.”

D. Iago urges Roderigo to awaken Brabantio with news of the elopement.

E. Iago presents images of animal lust to Brabantio.

F. Iago does not reveal himself to Brabantio.

G. Iago tells Othello how he had to defend Othello to Brabantio many times.

H. Roderigo threatens to drown himself, but Iago consoles him with promises of Desdemona.

I. Iago tells Roderigo, “Let’s be conjunctive in our revenge.”

#### III. Act II

A. Iago insists that it is difficult for him to easily imagine the praises for women that Desdemona asks.

B. Iago carefully observes Michael Cassio’s greeting of Desdemona.

- C. Iago reveals in an aside that he will “untune” Desdemona and Othello.
- D. Iago informs Roderigo of the greeting which Michael Cassio gave to Desdemona.
- E. Iago enlists Roderigo in a plan to anger Cassio and provoke him to a quarrel.
- F. Iago admits that he suspects Othello of infidelity with Emilia
- G. Iago tells Cassio that Othello relieved them from the watch.
- H. Iago insists on toasting to Othello with Cassio.
- I. Iago informs Montano that Cassio’s weakness is drinking.
- J. Iago instigates Roderigo to provoke a quarrel with Cassio.
- K. Othello hears Iago’s version of the scuffle.
- L. Iago urges Cassio to ask Desdemona for help.

#### IV. Act III

- A. Iago tells Cassio he will keep Othello away as Michael Cassio speaks with Desdemona.
- B. Iago engages in conversation with Othello regarding his thoughts.
- C. Iago plants thoughts of jealousy in Othello’s mind regarding Cassio and Desdemona.
- D. Iago snatches the handkerchief from Emilia.
- E. Iago tells Othello he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief.
- F. Iago promises to follow through with Othello’s vow for revenge.

#### V. Act IV

- A. Iago feeds Othello with images of lust and love between Cassio and Desdemona.
- B. Iago schemes to have Othello overhear a conversation he has with Bianca.
- C. Iago encourages close observation of Othello’s behavior after he strikes Desdemona.
- D. Iago suggests to Desdemona that Othello’s behavior is “but his humour.”
- E. After Roderigo expresses impatience with Iago, he suggests that Roderigo get involved in the plan to eliminate Michael Cassio by “knocking out his brains.”

#### VI. Act V

- A. Iago expresses his attitude toward Cassio’s and Roderigo’s lives.
- B. In the scuffle between Cassio and Roderigo, Iago wounds Cassio.
- C. Iago cries for help for Cassio after Lodovico and Gratiano come onto the scene.
- D. Iago pretends to search for those responsible for the villainy.
- E. Iago kills Roderigo.

- F. Bianca is implicated in a plot to kill Cassio.
- G. Iago states he will speak no more.

### Topic #3

Othello is a play in which many contrasts affect the characters' ability to discern the difference between reality and illusion. Identify and trace the contrasts between black and white images, love and lost, and honesty and dishonesty as they are presented throughout the play.

### Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *The juxtaposition of images of dark and light, love and lust, and honesty and dishonesty clouds the characters' perception so much so that they are unable to distinguish the difference between reality and illusion.*

#### II. Light and dark

- A. Roderigo refers to Othello as "the thick-lips."
- B. Roderigo awakens Brabantio at night, and Brabantio demands light to seek Desdemona.
- C. Iago suggests that Cassio drink a measure to "the black Othello."
- D. Othello refers to Desdemona's "whiter skin ...than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster."
- E. Othello comments "Put out the light, and then put out the light!"

#### III. Love and lust

- A. Iago comments to Brabantio that he'll have his daughter "covered with a Barbary horse...[his] nephews neigh to [him] and coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans."
- B. Iago refers to Othello and Desdemona as "making the beast with two backs" with reference to the consummation of their marriage.
- C. Iago tells Roderigo that when Desdemona's appetite for Othello fades she will desire Cassio.
- D. Iago fills Othello's mind with various images of animal acts of copulation to rouse his jealousy.
- E. Othello tells Emilia he killed his wife because "Cassio did top her."
- F. Desdemona and Othello speak in terms of deep love when they meet in Cyprus.

#### IV. Honesty and dishonesty

- A. Iago reveals to Roderigo "I am not what I am."
- B. Iago tells Othello that he has defended him to Brabantio many times.
- C. Roderigo is tricked into thinking that all of Iago's plans for him will get him to Desdemona.
- D. Desdemona believes Iago to be an honest man.
- E. Iago tells Cassio to plead his case with Desdemona.
- F. Iago tells Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation he has with Cassio.

## Modern Connections

While there are a number of issues in *Othello* that twentieth-century audiences can connect with (crimes of passion are not new to today's society; just turn on the evening news), modern audiences often come away from *Othello* feeling uncomfortable with the racism they see in the treatment Othello receives from the other characters in the play. And just as we are well aware of the racism in our own society, it may be that Shakespeare was writing about the racism in his own society, not just the racism in the Venetian society depicted in the play. Shakespeare's *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, but the Venetian society's fear of cultural difference, manifested in its racism, may be viewed as an indicator of Elizabethan England's concern to maintain its cultural identity in the face of extensive exploration and initial colonization of the New World. The Turk and the Moor, two traditional symbols of cultural values different from those of Western culture, threaten Venetian society but may be read as the embodiments of Elizabethan England's fear that its cultural values will be lost through colonization and the intermingling of different cultural values. In the same way, the depiction of Desdemona as the flower of Venetian society, the ideal of virtuous fidelity, is perhaps less a description of Venetian gender expectations than it is a depiction of woman designed to allay English fears that miscegenation (procreation between a man and a woman of different races) would threaten the order and culture of English society.

On one level, adultery in *Othello* can be seen as an individual infidelity that destroys both Iago and Othello as jealousy is incited in Othello by the promptings of his only confidante, "honest Iago." On another level, adultery may be viewed by some as destructive to a whole society. As some people in Shakespeare's time may have felt, and as some people in modern times may feel, the society that fails to limit the sexual activity of women runs the risk of losing a paternal identification—we can never be certain who the father is in cases of infidelity—but also losing cultural identity in miscegenation, Iago claims to hate Othello because Othello has passed him over for promotion and slept with his wife, Emilia, but a third motive for his behavior is, perhaps, one that he does not or cannot explicitly state: the motive to preserve the racial and cultural identity of his society. Or, perhaps, Iago is motivated by his own more personal feelings of racism (rather than his society's) which come to the fore as Iago deals with the fact that his superior is a black man.

When Iago's schemes have been revealed by Emilia, he is encouraged by the others to reveal his motives. This would certainly seem to be the perfect opportunity to reveal his anger at the loss of promotion and his jealous suspicions of Othello. But instead, he says, "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.ii.303–04). In one sense, this exclamation continues his power and control to the end. But in another sense, perhaps he cannot articulate his motives because they are the deep and unidentified racist feelings of his society in general. He is a functionary agent of a state that has irreconcilable misgivings about the marriage of a black Moor to a white woman.

Iago is arguably the voice of racial intolerance: he cries out to Brabantio, "your daughter and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs" (I.i.116–17) and "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88–89). These are metaphors calculated to alarm Brabantio and arouse his most primal fears. Racism and woman's unchecked sexuality are themes that resonate throughout the play and ignite the most confusion and fear when they are conceptualized as the offspring of a union between Desdemona and Othello. Thus, Iago makes his fiercest appeal when he cries out to Brabantio: "you'll have your daughter covered covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (I.i. 111–13). Although Iago takes it upon himself to repair the grievous cultural rupture caused by the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, he is not alone. Desdemona's own father cannot believe his daughter would be one

To fall in love with what she fear'd to look!  
It is a judgment maim'd, and most imperfect,  
That will confess perfection so could err  
Against all rules of nature.... (I.iii.98–101)

Brabantio believes that Othello has caused her to stray from such perfection by using magic potions and witchcraft to sway her affections.

Iago confesses that he, too, loves Desdemona (II.i.291). But it is a love constituted by neither lust nor an attraction to inner beauty. What he loves is the construction of Desdemona as the "perfect" woman, a perfection of sensibilities that must not be allowed to err. The audience knows full well that Desdemona has not been unfaithful to Othello. However, in the eyes of Iago and the others, she is guilty of a greater betrayal: her marriage to Othello.

*Othello* brings us closer to an understanding of Greek tragedy than any other of Shakespeare's plays. Othello perhaps never fully realizes how he has erred. What he has blundered into in ignorance is swiftly avenged by powerful and unstoppable forces. What excites fear and pity in the modern reader is an identification with Othello's frailty and the suspicion that those unstoppable forces are produced by the fears and ignorance in society.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## FAQs

1. [Why does Shakespeare choose Venice for the opening scenes of Othello?](#)
2. [Why does Iago choose Michael Cassio as an instrument of revenge against Othello?](#)
3. [Why does Shakespeare move the setting of the play to Cyprus?](#)
4. [Does Iago have a love life of his own?](#)
5. [What is Roderigo's function in the play?](#)
6. [What is Lodovico's function in the play?](#)

### Why does Shakespeare choose Venice for the opening scenes of Othello?

Othello is one of two plays in which Shakespeare uses Venice as a setting, the other being *The Merchant of Venice*. In both cases, Shakespeare depicts a thriving commercial society in which the inhabitants pursue luxury and see in the world in mercantile terms, as for example, when Iago says that he knows his own "price" in the play's first scene. In both plays attention is brought to the integral function of outsiders in Venetian society; Venice needs Shylock's borrowable ducats and Othello's military prowess. Above all, Venice has a duke and a council of senators, but it has no king. Under these circumstances, the final authority is customary and written law, but as Shakespeare shows us, laws can be twisted by political leaders who lack royal blood and the divine right to rule. Thus the Duke in Othello appears willing to hear Brabantio's complaint against an unidentified "abuser" of his daughter, but when he learns that the transgressor is Othello, an individual whose talents are essential to the interests of the state, he bends the law on the Moor's behalf.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Why does Iago choose Michael Cassio as an instrument of revenge against Othello?**

By provoking Othello's jealousy toward Cassio, Iago effectively kills two birds with one stone, inflicting harm on both his superior and the man whom his superior has chosen to take a position that Iago believes to be rightfully his. There are three other aspects of Cassio's character that make him a prime candidate for Iago's scheme. First, Cassio is known to have a problem handling his cups: if he can persuade or trick the lieutenant into drinking, it is likely that an inebriated Cassio will commit some form of misconduct. Second, Cassio is inordinately concerned with his reputation. If his good name is blotted, Cassio will seek to rectify the stain through an appeal to Othello. Third, Cassio is a lady's man. Not only does he have Desdemona's ear, he is known to have sexual affairs with women of questionable backgrounds, notably the courtesan Bianca whose jealousy reinforces Iago's cause of casting doubt upon Cassio's fidelity.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Why does Shakespeare move the setting of the play to Cyprus?**

The final four acts of Othello are set on the relative remote location of Cyprus. All of the characters are removed from the buffering effects of civil society as a consequence of this shift from Venice to the Mediterranean island. In Act IV, scene i., the Venetian nobleman Lodovico witnesses Othello physically strike Desdemona, and protests, "My Lord, this would not be believ'd in Venice/Though I should swear it" (IV, i., ll.242–243). Emotions and actions are exaggerated on an outpost where Othello is both the military commander and the civil administrator. The move to Cyprus allows Shakespeare to underscore Othello's immaturity, for while the Moor is an outstanding military leader, he is a poor administrator.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## **Does Iago have a love life of his own?**

Iago exploits the amorous passions of both Roderigo and Othello, but appears to have no romantic inclination himself. We gain some insight into Iago's relationship to the opposite sex through the statements and actions of his wife Emilia. In Act IV, scene iii, a troubled Desdemona asks her older serving lady Emilia if she would ever be unfaithful toward her husband. Emilia says that she would not cheat on Iago by "heaven's light," and then punctures the conceit by saying that she would commit adultery in the dark. Emilia apprises her lady about men in general, "Let them do us well; else let them know/The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (IV, iii., l.105). We gain the sense that the childless marriage between Iago and Emilia is held together by mundane bonds rather than any real affection. Once Emilia figures out how Iago has used the handkerchief that he instructed her to take from Desdemona, she immediately decides to inform on her husband, siding with her innocent lady rather than her guilty spouse. Iago is infuriated, calling her a "villainous whore." For the first time in the play, Iago loses his cool. When he kills Emilia, it does not advance his cause at all; by this time, the details of his scheme are in the open and Emilia's death serve no purpose. Iago does not have a love life and is incapable of all emotion save rage.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)



## What is Roderigo's function in the play?

The first character we encounter in *Othello* is Roderigo, a foolish suitor for Desdemona's hand, and his first words are in the form of a complaint about Iago's taking money from him on the pre-text of using it to advance Roderigo's suit. Roderigo complains about this same issue several times in the course of the play, and on each occasion not only is Iago able to divert Roderigo, he is able to direct him to take an unwitting part in Iago's grander schemes. Ultimately, Iago slays Roderigo. The gullible courtier is emblematic of a Venetian society that is obsessed with material wealth: he is convinced that the money and jewels he gives to Iago can buy Desdemona's love.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## What is Lodovico's function in the play?

Lodovico appears for the first time as an emissary to Cyprus from Duke of Venice in Act IV, scene i. He inquires casually about the situation on the island, but immediately witnesses Othello strike Desdemona. Lodovico is shocked by Othello's behavior, asking the rhetorical question: "Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate/Call all in all sufficient?" (IV, i., ll.204–205). As a neutral observer, his comment highlights the dramatic devolution that Othello has suffered under Iago's spell. Lodovico cannot prevent the tangle of evil that occurs in the last two acts of the play. He does relieve Othello of his office and appoints Cassio as the governor of Cyprus before Othello's suicide. It is to Lodovico that the task of passing summary judgment upon Iago falls, as he pledges to go straight back to the state of Venice to report what has occurred. In this sense, Lodovico represents the return of civil order to Cyprus, albeit too late for Iago's victims.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Bibliography and Further Reading

### Sources

Adamson, Jane. *"Othello" as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Booth, Stephen. *"King Lear," "Othello": Indefinition and Tragedy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983.

Campell, Lily B. *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973.

Elliott, George Roy. *Flaming Minister: A Study of "Othello" as a Tragedy of Love and Hate*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1953.

Erickson, Peter. *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

Evans, Bertrand. *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

- Heilman, Robert B. *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1956.
- Holloway, John. *The Story of the Night: Studies in Shakespeare's Major Tragedies*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Kiefer, Frederick. *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1983.
- Kirsch, Arthur. *The Passions of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press, of Virginia, 1990.
- McElroy, Bernard. *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Muir, Kenneth. *William Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies*. London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1966.
- Ogude, S.E. "Literature and Racism: The Example of Othello," *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*. Ed. Mythili Kaul. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1997, pp.151–166.
- Othello*. The Folger Library. Wright, Louis B. and Virginia A. Lamar, Eds. New York: Washington Square Press, 1957.
- Ribner, Irving. *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy*. London: Methuen, 1960.
- Shakespearean Criticism*. Mark Scott, Ed. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1987.
- Singh, Sarup. *Family Relationships in Shakespeare and the Restoration Comedy of Manners*. Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Speaight, Robert. *Shakespeare on The Stage*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973.
- Spivack, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.
- Sundelson, David. *Shakespeare's Restoration of the Father*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Vaughn, Virginia Mason. *Othello: A Contextual History*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999.
- Wilson, Harold S. *On the Design of Shakespearian Tragedy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957.
- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)